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ANOTHER LANGUAGE

MR. DOOLEY JR.

BY

ROSE FRANKEN

AND

JANE LEWIN

A Comedy for Children

Bound in paper

ANOTHER LANGUAGE

A Comedy Drama in Three Acts

BY

ROSE FRANKEN



SAMUEL FRENCH

NEW YORK

LOS ANGELES

SAMUEL FRENCH LTD.

LONDON

1937

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"ANOTHER LANGUAGE" was first produced by Arthur J. Beckhard at the Booth Theatre in New York City on April 25, 1932. The play was directed by Mr. Beckhard, the settings were designed by Cleon Throckmorton, and the cast was as follows:

MRS. HALLAM.....	Played by	<i>Margaret Wycherly</i>
MR. HALLAM.....	" "	<i>Wyrley Birch</i>
HARRY HALLAM.....	" "	<i>William Pike</i>
HELEN HALLAM.....	" "	<i>Margaret Hamilton</i>
WALTER HALLAM.....	" "	<i>Hal K. Dawson</i>
GRACE HALLAM.....	" "	<i>Irene Cattell</i>
PAUL HALLAM.....	" "	<i>Herbert Duffy</i>
ETTA HALLAM.....	" "	<i>Maude Allan</i>
VICTOR HALLAM.....	" "	<i>Glenn Anders</i>
STELLA HALLAM.....	" "	<i>Dorothy Stickney</i>
JERRY HALLAM.....	" "	<i>John Beal</i>

ACT ONE

Scene: The Hallams'.

Time: A Tuesday evening, in October.

ACT TWO

Scene: Stella's and Vickie's Apartment.

Time: The following Tuesday evening.

ACT THREE

Scene: The same as Act I.

Time: Early the next morning.

ACT ONE

ACT ONE

SCENE: *The basement dining-room of a high-stoop private house on one of the side-streets of Manhattan. The furnishings bespeak the middleclass opulence of a period thirty years past,—a heavily-carved dining-set, a Morris chair, and a leather couch of the kind that slants upward for the head and has no sides. Grated windows, Left look up the areaway. Door Upper Right leads to hall, and basement entrance. Door, Lower Right leads to pantry and kitchen.*

At the rise of the curtain, old MRS. HALLAM is at the buffet, carefully arranging crystal goblets and silverware. She is under seventy, but she walks with the slow, uncertain step of age, as if she wears, with a kind of pride, the becoming mantle of her years. Outwardly, she presents the picture of a sweet and appealing old lady, but one gradually becomes aware of the incessant functioning of an alert mind, a quick discernment, and an indomitable will.

MR. HALLAM enters from upstairs carrying a spindly gold chair. He is mild and lovable, imbued with the tranquillity of a deep and mellowed philosophy. He is content to say little and to slip into the background.

MRS. HALLAM

Why must you drag down a good parlor chair?

MR. HALLAM

We'll need it, there are ten of us counting Stella—

MRS. HALLAM

Stella. Since when?—Here. Quickly. Please—

[Holds out her arm for him to button her sleeve.]

MR. HALLAM (*as he obeys her*)

Victor said she was coming—

MRS. HALLAM

Victor has been saying that every week.

MR. HALLAM (*peaceably*)

Well, she couldn't come if she was sick—

MRS. HALLAM

It is funny she is well enough to go to art school—

MR. HALLAM

She should do something with herself. Stella has brains.

[Crosses to couch and re-arranges scattered newspapers.]

MRS. HALLAM

Yes, and Victor would be better off with a wife who didn't have so much brains.

MR. HALLAM

Nonsense— They are very happy together.

MRS. HALLAM (*dryly*)

H'm. So long as she has him wound around her little finger.

MR. HALLAM

I wouldn't say that.

MRS. HALLAM

You wouldn't?—Why do you think they live in that terrible neighborhood, away from all of us—? (*Breaks off as footsteps are heard in areaway.*) Ah. That is Harry. See that everything is ready in the kitchen, hurry. (*The bell rings.*) Come in, the gate is open! (*To MR. HALLAM as he goes out to pantry.*) Keep some of the tongue back for lunch tomorrow, Papa. (*She moves to door Upper Right, fluttering a little. HARRY enters, followed by his wife, HELEN. He is a rather heavy-set man in the early forties, pleasant-faced, dependable, and dull. HELEN has gone to fat only in one place, around the hips, and looks a little like a horse. She is small-town American against her husband's rather Teutonic solidity, and is capable of getting pleasantly excited over nothing at all. She has a sporadic sense of humor, and does not hesitate to speak her mind— Affectionately to HARRY.*) Hello, my boy. How are you? (*As a statement.*) Tired. You had a hard day.

HARRY

You're right, I did. More'n my wife noticed when I got home. (*Kisses her heartily and pats her shoulder.*) Where's Papa?

MRS. HALLAM

He will be in right away.

HELEN (*abruptly, having removed her hat and coat*)

Hello.

MRS. HALLAM

Hello, Helen. How are the children?

HELEN (*bending to peck at her mother-in-law's cheek, and proffering a clumsily wrapped package*)

All right.—Nobody else here yet?

MRS. HALLAM (*resenting it*)

No, and it is so late! Something for me?—You shouldn't.

HELEN

I tried out that cake-recipe in the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

MRS. HALLAM

Oh, and is it good?

[*Opens box, places cake on buffet on plate.*]

HELEN

I think it's delicious. Wasn't it good, Harry, the cake for supper?

[*Sits herself at table in a business-like way, and picks a grape from fruit bowl in center.*]

HARRY

Not so hot.—Why do you leave the latch off the gate, Mamma, anyone could walk right upstairs?

MRS. HALLAM

The girl is out.—Her aunt is dying again.

HELEN

Well, you got to believe her in a big house like this. Lord only knows why you don't sell it and move into

a hotel or a kitchenette,—just you and Grandpa.
[*She pronounces it Granper.*]

HARRY

That's your idea of Heaven—

HELEN

It certainly is—
[*Punctuates with a grape.*]

MRS. HALLAM

I couldn't live in one of those places, not for one minute.

HARRY

Of course she couldn't! You're a fine psychologist.

HELEN

Never mind psychology, when you need common sense—

MRS. HALLAM

Children, children don't fight—

HELEN (*with dignity*)

This is no fight.
[*Grape.*]

HARRY (*pushing the bowl toward her*)

For God's sake, take a whole bunch and stop picking!

HELEN (*quite reasonably*)

Leave me alone, I don't want a whole bunch . . .
(*Moves bowl toward Center again.*) Everybody coming tonight, Gran'ma?

MRS. HALLAM

My sons never forget Tuesday nights.

HELEN

Listen. What's the matter with your sons' wives?

MRS. HALLAM

I always say my sons' wives are very good to me also. (*Sighs faintly.*) All except Stella—we are not high-toned enough for Stella.

HELEN (*with a trace of envy*)

She certainly gets away with murder the way she hardly ever shows up.

HARRY

I blame Vick.

MRS. HALLAM

Victor tries, poor boy, but what can he do? . . . Well, he said she would be here with him tonight.

HELEN

I'll believe it when I see her.

MRS. HALLAM

She will probably be too tired to come or something—

HELEN

Tired! From what, I'd like to know?

MRS. HALLAM (*too sweetly*)

Art school, perhaps.

HARRY (*an easy ally*)

She certainly does do crazy things.

HELEN

Wasn't it last year she wanted to take a job or something?

MRS. HALLAM (*exercised*)

Yes, and it was all I could do to make Victor put his foot down. "Victor," I told him, "your wife does not have to support you, it is more important for her to make you a good home and bear you children."

HARRY

You said it—

HELEN

That's dumb. If she can't have any, just staying home isn't going to do the trick.

MRS. HALLAM

I feel very sorry for Victor, that is all I can say.

HARRY

Well, he's a grown man; you mustn't worry about him.

MRS. HALLAM (*with spirit*)

He is my youngest, and I am entitled to worry. (*As she speaks, WALTER suddenly appears tiptoe at the hall door, a dapper and slightly younger edition of HARRY. A puffiness beneath the eyes, and a deeply engraved line from nose to chin marks him definitely as a HALLAM. In the family, he is considered a great cut-up. Now the fun simply beams out of his eyes as he makes his way cautiously behind his mother and covers her eyes with his hands. She emits a delighted*

little scream.) It is Walter!— Always up to something, such a boy!

[They kiss.]

HELEN

Hello Wallie! Where's your wife?

WALTER

Me wiff?

[Looks under the table.]

GRACE (*from the hall*)

When your wife drops something, you might at least help her find it!

WALTER

Bring it here, sweetness, and I'll pick it up for you!

[GRACE appears on the threshold, dusting off her pocket-book. She is forty,—fat, good-natured, and literal. She is given to long silences from which she wakes abruptly at the hint of food, gossip or entertainment.]

MRS. HALLAM

Hello, Grace. How are the children?

GRACE (*their hands meet limply, followed by the inevitable peck*)

Johnny has a snuffle. (*Makes a bee-line toward HELEN.*) Hello— Say, you owe me fifty-three cents from last week.

HELEN

I do not—

GRACE

You certainly do. I paid carfare and soda—

[*They thrash it out, HELEN remembers.*]

WALTER (*simultaneously*)

Where's Pop?

[*Lights a cigarette.*]

MRS. HALLAM

I will tell him. (*Crosses to kitchen door down Right and calling.*) Papa, hurry! The boys are here—(*Closes kitchen door, then adds.*) And Helen and Grace.

MR. HALLAM (*from kitchen*)

I am coming in one minute!

HELEN (*as GRACE starts to take off her coat*)

Last year's, isn't it?

GRACE

Yes, but it's going to last me through—unless I get a good sale after Christmas.

HELEN

That's what I'm waiting for—then I'll have something to start next season on, like you've got this one.

GRACE (*seating herself at table Left of HELEN*)

Absolutely—if you've got something to *begin* on, you're fixed—

MR. HALLAM (*entering from kitchen*)

Hello, Helen—Gracie—

[*They exchange greetings.*]

WALTER

Hello, Pop—!

MR. HALLAM

Hello, my boy . . .

HARRY

Hello, Pop—!

[The three men gather at couch.]

MRS. HALLAM (*in armchair at table*)

And what is new, Grace?

GRACE (*trying to be bright about it*)

Not a thing. Not a thing—

WALTER

Paul coming? I got to ask him about some stocks.

GRACE (*automatically*)

You stay out, you lost enough—

HARRY

I hear Paul's kid is down-town now.

MRS. HALLAM

Yes, Jerry is a real business man. Paul is very proud of him.

GRACE (*with a knowing look to HELEN*)

I thought there was some talk of Jerry going away to study architecture or something?

MRS. HALLAM (*coldly*)

That was only Etta's talk. Not Paul's.

HELEN (*maliciously*)

What's the matter, Gran'ma, didn't you want your oldest grandson to get educated?

HARRY

What you talking about, he had three years of college. (*Adds.*) More than I had.

WALTER

More'n any of us had—except Vick—

HELEN (*sotto-voce*)

That's no criterion.

MR. HALLAM

I wanted all of you boys to go, but we couldn't afford it in those days.

MRS. HALLAM

Well, and my sons are not so bad, anyway.

GRACE

You don't have to live with 'em, Gran'ma—

HARRY

What do you say to a little game of pinochle, Pop?

MR. HALLAM

Fine, my boy!

[*The men begin to set up card table in Upper Left corner of room.*]

MRS. HALLAM

How is your new girl, Grace?

GRACE

How is she? She ate three eggs for breakfast this morning, that's how is she.

HELEN

That's nerve, d'you know it!

GRACE (*with mounting crescendo*)

Of course it's nerve!

MRS. HALLAM (*agitated*)

I wouldn't *keep* her!

GRACE

I'm NOT!

[WALTER *tiptoes past HELEN and runs his finger down her spine with a shrill whistle.*

HELEN (*on a scream*)

You stop that, Walter Hallam!—Grace, that husband of yours is too fresh entirely!

MRS. HALLAM

Walter always likes his little joke.

HELEN

Funny. Harry's just the opposite. He never cuts up.

HARRY (*arranging cards*)

What don't I do?

HELEN

I say—you're no sun-beam.

[*The area-bell rings.* MRS. HALLAM *rises.*

MRS. HALLAM

That is Paul!

HARRY (*calling through window*)

Come in, the gate's open!

HELEN (*to GRACE*)

See the pin Etta got from Paul on her anniversary?

GRACE

Not yet, but I heard about it.

HELEN

Gran'ma says it cost eight hundred.

GRACE

Well, his business is good again,—why not?

HELEN

Sure, why not? She'd be a fool not to.

HARRY (*ad libs*)

Only fifty-one cards in this deck, Pop.

[MR. HALLAM *goes to buffet for extra deck.*

[*The voices drop as PAUL and ETTA enter, nodding a general greeting to the room. PAUL is the oldest HALLAM; a little greyer around the temples and more sure of himself in a tense, reserved fashion. ETTA is a well-preserved woman of about forty-three, punctiliously dressed in black satin, and round pearl earrings. She wears her husband's success with an air.*

MRS. HALLAM (*with her genius for making each of her sons feel himself the favorite*)

Paul, my boy, come in, I have been waiting for you.

PAUL

Hello, Mamma.

[*Kisses her with quiet affection.*

ETTA (*her eyes in space, as she proffers her cheek*)

Hello, Mother.

MRS. HALLAM

Hello, Etta. (*Reproachfully.*) You are so late.

PAUL (*his tone hinting a recent quarrel*)

Don't blame me. I was ready.

ETTA (*with a look toward him*)

Well, what's the terrible rush, I'd like to know.

GRACE

Let's see the brooch, Etta—

HELEN (*leaning forward with GRACE to admire it*)

Beauty—that's a beauty, Etta.

GRACE

I like that center diamond.

ETTA

It's a marquis.

GRACE

Never met him, my acquaintance begins and ends with a chip.

{*Laughs hysterically and gives HELEN a playful push.*}

PAUL (*looking over the card table*)

Lead your spades, Pop.

HARRY

Let him play his own hand.

[PAUL *hangs up his coat in the hall, followed by* MRS. HALLAM.

WALTER

Wait a minute, Paul—I got a swell tip today.

GRACE (*calling after them*)

Tell him it's no good, Paul.

[HELEN *yawns broadly*.

ETTA (*blowing her gloves*)

Sleepy?

HELEN

Dead.

ETTA

So'm I—I had the bridge-club today, and I'd have given anything to go to bed early.

GRACE

Honestly, Tuesday nights seem like a week long.

[*Yawns also*.

HELEN

Stella might come. That'll be a diversion for once.

GRACE

Really she's coming? I bet she doesn't!

ETTA

I don't think we could stand such an honor.

GRACE

How is her ladyship, anyway?

HELEN

Don't ask me. I haven't seen her since the hospital. I called on her when she had her miscarriage.

ETTA

I didn't even call—

GRACE (*virtuously*)

Well, I sent fruit. I had a basket left from my operation and had it filled.

HELEN

That's not so cheap, it amounts up.

GRACE

Not if you put grapefruit in the bottom—

ETTA (*stubbornly*)

I'm glad I didn't bother. She doesn't kill herself for any of us.

HELEN (*unexpectedly*)

Yes and I hand it to her— (GRACE and ETTA look at her in surprise. HELEN glances at card table to be sure the men are engrossed in the game.) She made up her mind from the start not to have the family on her neck every second, and she's stuck to it.

GRACE (*bitterly*)

Only you forget Vickie hasn't got the family feeling the others have—

ETTA (*with equal bitterness*)

Ummm—

HELEN (*deliberately*)

I'm not so sure about that. Vickie may be different in a lot of things, but when it comes right down to it he's a Hallam first and last.

ETTA (*going out to hall with her coat*)

Then how does Stella get away with it I'd like to know.

GRACE (*with a wealth of ironical resentment*)

He's crazy about her, that's why.

ETTA

I don't know what holds him. She's not even pretty.

HELEN

Her hair's cute, but that's not enough.

GRACE

I asked Walter once if he thought she had sex.

HELEN

Aren't you terrible.

ETTA (*as she comes back into room*)

What did he say, Grace?

[*Sits at table.*]

GRACE (*complacently*)

He said not for him she didn't.

[*MRS. HALLAM, PAUL and WALTER enter from hall. HARRY and MR. HALLAM are still engaged in their game. WALTER goes to Morris chair down Left and PAUL approaches card table.*]

MRS. HALLAM (*joining her daughters-in-law*)

Paul was telling me that Jerry is catching on very nicely to the business.

ETTA

He's not happy down there, no matter what Paul says.

GRACE (*mischief-making*)

You were willing to let him go abroad to study, weren't you, Etta?

ETTA

I wanted him to—but I'm only his mother.

MRS. HALLAM

I do not want to take my son's part, but Paul was perfectly right. A young boy shouldn't be away from home.

GRACE

He could get in trouble with women and everything, Etta. You know how Paris is.

ETTA

Oh, don't be silly—

HELEN

Etta would like to brag she has a son in Europe studying architecture.

ETTA

Is that so? Well wait till your children grow up and see how you like all this family interference.

PAUL (*from card table*)

That's enough, Etta, please.

MRS. HALLAM

Children, children— (*A whistle sounds in the area-*

way. MRS. HALLAM *rises quickly.*) Victor! That's Victor! Come in! Come in!

[Voices sound in the hall.

HELEN (*straining*)

Listen—I think she's with him!

ETTA

Sounds like her—

GRACE

Well for goodness sake.

WALTER (*overhearing from Morris chair*)

Oh go on, you females are jealous because Stella's ten years younger than you and has a shape.

[VICTOR enters first, carrying one end of a long florist's box. STELLA follows, carrying the other end. They are laughing, as if they had been having a very good time of managing their unwieldy burden. STELLA is about thirty. Because she is very slender, she looks even younger. She is pretty in a fragile, spiritual way. Her manner becomes a little shy, even timid, as if the crowded, smoke-filled room suddenly takes her breath away. VICTOR is a HALLAM, a young HALLAM, but unmistakably of the family in the distinguishing line from nose to mouth. He is not so heavy as his brothers, and has only just begun to lose his shock of thick wavy hair. He is about thirty-five.

VICKIE

Hello, Mamma! How's my best girl?

[Hugs her boyishly, dropping his end of the box.

MRS. HALLAM

Fine, my boy. I was afraid you were not coming.
(*Kisses him.*) And Stella! This is a surprise, Stella!
Come in,— Come in—

STELLA (*achieving sincerity*)

Hello, Mother, I'm awfully glad to see you— How
are you?

MRS. HALLAM

So—so— (STELLA *hesitates a moment, then bends
shyly to kiss her mother-in-law— Gives her the flower
box.*) Oh, thank you! But you shouldn't—

GRACE

Box and everything—

STELLA (*approaching table*)

Hello—everybody.

HELEN

Hello, you're a stranger.

STELLA

I know. I'm really ashamed.

GRACE

I feel as if we ought to be introduced.

STELLA

Oh, Grace, it isn't as bad as all that!

ETTA

Well, you look pretty good for anyone who says she's
been sick!

STELLA

Oh, I'm fine again, now!

[*They turn and look her up and down as she follows VICKIE to card table to greet MR. HALLAM.*

MR. HALLAM (*holding out his arms to her*)

I knew you would come, my child.

STELLA (*embracing him with real spontaneity*)

Hello, Father!

HELEN (*craning to see the huge chrysanthemums that MRS. HALLAM lifts out of the box*)

Say, aren't they beauties! (*Turns backward to STELLA.*) Those are beauties, Stella. Aren't they beauties, though, everyone, they must have cost something all right!

GRACE

Mmm—*Six* of 'em!

WALTER

Gee, you blew yourself.

PAUL

Hard times don't seem to hit you, Vick.

[*VICTOR laughs and exits to hall with his own and STELLA's coat.*

MR. HALLAM (*admiring them*)

They are wonderful! Beautiful.

MRS. HALLAM

Yes, but Stella should not let her husband spend so much money for nothing.

[She finds a glass vase and tries flowers in it. Their long stems overbalance it and make it ludicrous. This starts a hub-bub of comment and rising concern.]

HARRY (*glancing over from card table*)

Stems are too long.

HELEN

Really!

HARRY

Excuse me for living.

ETTA

They do look awful in that little vase, though.

MRS. HALLAM (*helplessly; with a trace of annoyance*)

But I have nothing else big enough for such big flowers.

GRACE

Simple, just cut the stems.

STELLA

Oh no, don't!

HARRY

Sure, it's better for the flowers to break 'em off, I read some place.

HELEN

Oh, Harry, for goodness sake, Stella *likes* the stems.

GRACE

They'll only die. You can't leave them that way.

MRS. HALLAM

I don't know what to do.

[Looks appealingly about her.]

VICKIE (*re-entering from hall*)

What's the trouble?

HELEN

We have nothing to put the flowers in, and Gran'ma's all upset.

VICKIE

I told you it was silly to get chrysanthemums like that, Stella! Next time, listen.

STELLA

Oh Vickie, you liar, you know you had as good a time as I did buying them—and they're so beautiful—

VICKIE (*in a kind of conflict*)

So's an oak tree, but what are you going to do with it?

STELLA

I thought we could use the umbrella stand.

MRS. HALLAM

People do not use umbrella stands for flowers.

VICKIE (*grinning*)

Not sensible people, but you don't know Stella.

STELLA (*with an answering smile to him*)

Well, let's try it anyway.

[Goes into hall for umbrella stand.]

MRS. HALLAM (*with a faint smile*)

Stella likes her own way in things.

GRACE (*looking after STELLA*)

That's a cute dress she's got on. But I can't wear that new line at all.

HELEN

Listen! You need a different corset now, I keep telling you. One that comes up—look! And then down here, see, right where you need it, and it holds you in.

[*Demonstrates.*]

GRACE

Well, I have to be comfortable, I can't kill myself for style.

ETTA

Shouldn't eat so much.

[*STELLA returns, lugging stand. Commences to arrange flowers. While the WOMEN watch her, the card game gradually breaks up.*]

PAUL

Well, Pop, you wiped the floor with him!

WALTER

Go on, Pop! Collect! Make him pay up!

HARRY

Those damn spades killed me!

[*Digs his hand in his pocket.*]

VICKIE

What'd you play for? Ten dollars a game?

MR. HALLAM (*waving money away*)

No, no—I don't want your money.

[*They try to press it on him, and MRS. HALLAM, seeing that he is about to refuse, takes it herself. There is much noise and jollity attending the transaction.*]

ETTA (*apropos of the flowers*)

Not bad—

GRACE

No it isn't really.

ETTA

I have a cloisonné stand, on a top shelf like a fool.

HELEN

Yes, and who'll buy you the chrysanthemums?

ETTA

Artificial? what's the matter with artificial?

[*MRS. HALLAM approaches center.*]

HELEN

Look, Gramma, see what a smart daughter-in-law you have.

MRS. HALLAM

It would be very nice if it wasn't for umbrellas.

STELLA

Well, we could make believe it was always a chrysanthemum stand! (*To VICKIE.*) Take this in the kitchen, will you dear, and fill it with water?

VICKIE

All right, nuisance.

[*He exits.*]

[WALTER leaves card table. Slips up behind GRACE and runs his finger down her spine. She jumps elaborately and shrieks.

GRACE

Walter Hallam, if you do that again, I'm going to slap your face!

[Reaches out for him, but he dodges.

HARRY

You're a rotten shot, Grace, here's the way to do it.

[HARRY feints at WALTER and there is good-natured boxing business.

WALTER

Come on, I'll lick you.

HARRY

Yes, you will.

MRS. HALLAM

Boys, boys, don't hurt yourselves.

MR. HALLAM

They're all right.

[PAUL has been at sideboard peeling an orange. With unwonted and awkward playfulness, he comes behind GRACE and dangles it against her ear. She emits a sharp shriek.

MRS. HALLAM (*her attention caught*)

Paul is hungry!—Come, we better have something now!

PAUL

Not for me, I just like an orange.

GRACE

Anyway, we just got here f'evvins sake.

WALTER

Oh, you'll manage to eat when it arrives.

PAUL (*remembering*)

Say, the kid said he might drop in, didn't he, Etta?

ETTA

Yes, but he wasn't sure.

MRS. HALLAM

That is not right. Tuesday nights ought to begin to mean something to him.—He is old enough?

PAUL

That's true, Mamma. You ought to talk to him, Etta,—

MRS. HALLAM (*as she exits to kitchen*)

I will.

MR. HALLAM (*as he follows her*)

Now, now, he wants to be with young people—

ETTA

That's right, Father.

PAUL

Pop's too good-natured.

STELLA (*moving toward ETTA*)

Etta, I don't think I've seen Jerry since—

ETTA (*interrupting*)

You know how long? I'll tell you. Since your wedding.

GRACE

Oh g'wan, no—

ETTA

Yes, shows how often she visits us—

STELLA

But that's not possible—we've been in your new apartment—

ETTA (*grudgingly*)

That's right. Once. And Jerry was out. I remember.

GRACE

You wouldn't know him now, Stella—

ETTA (*with a proud sigh*)

Yes he's a grown-up man all of a sudden,—I can't believe it myself—

HELEN

Jerry'll never grown up. He'll always be a kid. I'm crazy about Jerry, honestly, I'm crazy about him—

ETTA

You'd be surprised. Jerry's very mature for twenty-one.

GRACE

He reminds me a lot of the way Vickie used to look.

HELEN

There's a strong resemblance between all the boys; I said to Gran'ma the other day, I said, "Vickie's getting to be the image of Harry now that he's putting on weight."

VICKIE (*overhearing, as he comes in backward from pantry, dragging the heavy umbrella stand after him*)
Who's putting on weight?

GRACE and HELEN

You!

VICKIE

You're crazy!

STELLA

Oh Vickie, you big fat thing, you know you gained *eleven pounds* in the last year—

MRS. HALLAM (*entering with table-cloth, etc.*)

Victor gained eleven pounds? That is *wonderful!*

GRACE

You don't seem to think it's so wonderful, Stella.

MRS. HALLAM

What? Stella is not happy her husband is putting on flesh?

STELLA

I want him to stay young and handsome!

[*Purses her lips at VICKIE in a little secret kiss.*]

MRS. HALLAM

Nonsense! People should eat plenty, never mind looks!

VICKIE

That's right. You tell that to Stella. She's positively starving me!

STELLA

Oh Vickie, Mother actually believes it!

VICKIE (*putting his arm around STELLA*)

No, she's pretty good to me, my wife is.

MRS. HALLAM

And I guess you are pretty good to her. All my boys are good husbands.

WALTER

Sure, we're good husbands, but we ain't appreciated.

HELEN

Good, but not romantic.

HARRY

What've *we* got to be romantic about?

GRACE

Ask Vickie. Vickie's the only one that's a little—you know—

VICKIE (*annoyed and self-conscious*)

What do you mean, a little "you—know—"

HELEN (*apropos of table-cloth*)

Throw me, Gran'ma, I'll put it on.

MRS. HALLAM

No, no, Papa and I can do everything.

GRACE

Oh, for goodness sake, why shouldn't we help? Gimme, Helen, gimme the cloth over here—

[*In a moment everyone is helping to set the table and bring in food.*]

WALTER (*as he deftly lifts a slice of meat from a platter that VICKIE is carrying*)

Well, Vick, I hear you want to move on this side of town—

VICKIE

Who said so?

WALTER

Mamma was saying something about it.

HELEN

Yes, we hear you're sick of artists and cockroaches.

ETTA

Personally, I don't think the East River can compare with the Hudson.

VICKIE (*cheerfully*)

Well, whenever Stella says the word I'm ready—

PAUL (*significantly*)

You pay the rent don't you?

GRACE (*breaking the silence that follows PAUL's remark*)

You know my little tailor, Etta—he raised his prices—

ETTA

Well, what do you expect, you *will* recommend him to everybody—

HELEN

This tongue's home-made, Gran'ma, isn't it?

MRS. HALLAM

I never buy what I can cook.

WALTER

Humph. My wife never cooks what she can buy!

GRACE

That's a nasty thing to say, Walter Hallam. And it isn't true!

WALTER

Oh no!

MRS. HALLAM

Children, children, don't fight. Come on, start in everybody!

WALTER

Olives! Hurrah!

PAUL

Say, that looks like honest-to-God chicken salad!

MRS. HALLAM

Oh I remember what you all like! It doesn't seem so long ago that you were all at home with me, here!

HELEN (*settling down to the food*)

Gran'ma, you should have had girls.

MRS. HALLAM (*busily serving the boys*)

Why girls?

HELEN

Then you wouldn't have had to have daughters-in-law.

HARRY

That's a dumb thing to say!

HELEN

Oh, go on! Gran'ma can take a joke.

[MRS. HALLAM *pretends not to hear. Turns to STELLA who is still standing.*

MRS. HALLAM

Sit down, Stella! Sit down! Don't be like company.

STELLA

Oh, I'm not, really I'm not.

MRS. HALLAM

You do not even take your hat off, that is not nice.

WALTER

She knows it gives her sex appeal.

STELLA

It's so light I didn't even know it was on—

HELEN (*with one of her winks*)

Well, take it off, we all saw it.

GRACE (*as STELLA removes it*)

Let's see, I've been admiring it.

WALTER

Here's where it costs me money.

GRACE

Doesn't even fit. Besides I can't wear a hat that shape.

ETTA

Simple enough, but that's the kind that costs the most.

(*Tries it on tentatively.*) Would you like me in it?

PAUL

No. It's too kiddish on you—it's all right on Stella.

MRS. HALLAM (*a little too pleasantly*)

Stella knows how to buy.

STELLA

I made it, Mother.

HELEN

Oh go on, you didn't. Let me look.

MRS. HALLAM

Well, it is nice that Stella has the time to sew for herself.

GRACE

No joke.

WALTER (*who enjoys teasing his wife*)

Grace's motto is why sew when you've got safety pins?

GRACE (*always vulnerable*)

Is that so? I get precious little time with three growing children.

MRS. HALLAM

Well, Stella hasn't got such worries.

STELLA (*after a short pause*)

I wish I did have.

VICKIE

You said it.

WALTER (*expansively, looking from one to the other*)

Well . . . !

GRACE

Now, Wally, don't begin to get vulgar.

MRS. HALLAM

Do you know what Stella should do if she wants babies? She should not run around so much—

WALTER

Yes, stay home a day, Stella, and see what the stork brings you.

MRS. HALLAM

But I mean it ; I mean it.

STELLA

But, Mother, I don't run around, I never make a date. I don't go out of the house hardly.

MRS. HALLAM

Yah, yah, but you have so much always on your mind—that's what wears you out.

STELLA

I have so much on my mind . . . ?

[*The WOMEN are arrested, sensing a small crisis.*]

MRS. HALLAM

Victor says you go to an art school, now.

STELLA

Oh—that! That's only twice a week for an hour.

MRS. HALLAM

It's twice a week too much when you are run down.

STELLA

Oh, but Mother, that doesn't hurt me, it does me good, I love it.

HARRY

What do you do there, anyway?

HELEN

What do you think she does, scrub floors?

STELLA

I'm taking a course in sculpturing.

WALTER

What do you sculp?—Nudes?

STELLA

Heads only—

ETTA

What do you do with 'em when they're finished?

STELLA (*non-plussed*)

Why—nothing!

[*Laughs.*

MRS. HALLAM

You see—there is no sense to it.

STELLA

Maybe you're right—but—I think I'd go crazy if I didn't do *something*—

MRS. HALLAM

But you have something to do. Make a good home for your husband and have children.

VICKIE

Mamma means you should get yourself in good condition, Stella, and she's right. Lord knows I'm tired of talking to you on the subject.

GRACE

I only wish someone would invite *me* to rest up.

MRS. HALLAM

I'm afraid Stella doesn't believe we are talking for her own good.

STELLA

Yes I do, Mother, but—

VICKIE

But what—?

STELLA

I think everyone knows the thing that is best for himself—

HELEN

And that's polite for "mind your own business."

WALTER

Who should mind their own business?

VICKIE (*half-in-earnest*)

Oh we're just trying to put some sense into my wife's head but it looks like a hopeless job.

STELLA

Oh Vickie—

MRS. HALLAM

Victor is right.

VICKIE (*playing up to the approbation in his mother's eyes. Not unpleasantly but with bravado*)

Yes, and one of these days I'm going to put my foot down, young lady!

WALTER

That's the way to treat 'em!

PAUL

He's only talking!

HELEN

What's the expression you always use, Gran'ma?
Stella has him wound around her little finger!

HARRY

Hen-peck makes it clearer!

[There is a general laugh from family.]

VICKIE (*with a new, harsh note in his voice*)

Oh, so I'm a Hen-peck, eh?

STELLA (*sensing his conflict*)

Oh please leave us alone—all of you!

GRACE

Stella's mad now!

MRS. HALLAM

No, it is Victor who is angry. He does not like to hear the truth.

WALTER

Gee, I started something!

PAUL

You started something, all right!

[More laughter and comment from family.]

MR. HALLAM

Children, children, stop it now—please— (*Lays a gentle hand on STELLA's shoulder.*) Come Stella, eat something, my child.

STELLA

I am!

MRS. HALLAM

Tch. Papa's right, you hardly touched your plate.

STELLA (*being enthusiastic*)

Oh I've eaten a lot. Everything's awfully good.

MRS. HALLAM

Vickie, look, that is what she calls a lot.

VICKIE (*frowning*)

Why you've just played with everything, Stella—

WALTER

No wonder she keeps her girlish figure—

STELLA (*apologetically; struggling with the food*)

We had an awfully late supper—

VICKIE (*grievedly, behind STELLA*)

Well everybody else had supper, too— (MRS. HALLAM starts to clear away soiled dishes, and HELEN jumps up to help her. GRACE carries plates into kitchen. VICKIE finds an opportunity in the confusion to speak to STELLA in an undertone.) Gosh, how do you think it makes me feel when you sit around with your nose in the air—

STELLA (*on an imploring note*)

Oh Vickie, don't be silly—

HELEN (*discovering her cake on buffet and approaching table, waving knife*)

Look, Gran'ma forgot to put my cake on the table—

Come on, everybody has to have a piece of my carrot cake—

HARRY (*horrified*)

Christ was that carrots—!

HELEN

Have a piece, Vickie—

VICKIE

No thanks, I like my carrots in soup—

WALTER (*as HELEN turns to him*)

Same here—

[GRACE *re-enters from kitchen.*

HELEN

Oh come on somebody—you, Grace—

GRACE

Not me—I ate too much as it is—

MRS. HALLAM (*entering*)

Here are some clean plates—Vickie, come back, finish eating—Paul, Walter—

[*Puts plates on table.*

WALTER

Getting more appetite— Here, Pop, take Vickie on for a game—

VICKIE

All right, wait'll I get a light.

STELLA (*in an undertone*)

How late is it, Vickie?

PAUL (*overhearing*)

It's early—

MRS. HALLAM

Stella is always looking at the time when she comes.

STELLA

No, I only wanted to see if my watch was losing—

VICKIE (*putting his arm around his mother*)

C'mon over by me, Mom, and bring me luck—

MRS. HALLAM

No, I must bring Papa luck.

[*Joins card party.*]

[*The wives find themselves isolated once more at the table. All but STELLA, who continues to clear away the dishes, glad to be busy.*]

HELEN (*resentfully*)

The men play cards but we've just got to sit. (*Takes a grape.*) But when Harry goes to my folks it's a different story. "C'mon Helen, I got a big day tomorrow, got to get some sleep!"

ETTA

That's Paul all over.

GRACE

I said to Walter once, "You don't know how lucky you are, Walter, you married an orphan." (*Begins to nibble carrot cake.*) This is good, d'you know it?

HELEN

I think it's good. Go on, try a decent piece— Come here, Stella, with those clean plates—

STELLA

I'm sorry—

[Brings plates back to table.]

GRACE

Well, just a speck then—no that's too much—

[HELEN measures proper amount.]

ETTA

Here, I'll take just a tiny taste—

WALTER (*from card table*)

My God, they're at it again— Throw me an olive, will you—

*[STELLA tosses him an olive.]*ETTA (*sharply, as she drops a bit of the cake on her waist*)

Tech—goodness!

HELEN

*Spot!*GRACE (*in great excitement, as ETTA starts to rub*)

No—no—no— Try powder, any kind of powder, just powder—put it on, let it stay for a while and then rub it off—

ETTA (*agitated*)

I heard of that—who has powder anyone?

STELLA

Will a compact do?

GRACE (*her mouth full of carrot cake*)

Of course, as long as it's powder.

[STELLA hurriedly finds her bag—empties its contents on the table, and gives the compact to ETTA. ETTA rubs powder on the spot under GRACE'S supervision. There is frantic adlibbing from GRACE and HELEN.]

ETTA

Disgusting. I just paid two dollars to have this dress cleaned.

GRACE

Dollar cleaner's good enough for me— No—no—*pat* it on, don't rub. My goodness I could eat the whole cake and never spill a speck on me. Now—that's better—sit down and don't eat any more for goodness' sake—

[*The hub-bub dies away.*]

HELEN (*noticing a chain and pendant that STELLA is returning to bag*)

What's that?

STELLA

An old pendant. I noticed a stone coming loose on the way up so I took it off.

HELEN (*examining it*)

Looks like lead or something, doesn't it? Put it on—let's see. (STELLA *slips the chain over her neck.*)

Well it's—it's out of the ordinary, I'll say that for it.

GRACE (*not liking it*)

Is that colored glass in there or what?

STELLA

Moonstones—and jade.

ETTA (*leaning over and exhibiting her brooch*)

Did you see my brooch?

VICKIE (*from card table*)

Stella's taste runs to junk, thank God, and not to diamonds!

STELLA (*with strained enthusiasm*)

Oh! Stunning—

ETTA

That's a marquis in the center— (*Pauses.*) Oh, I don't know what makes me so sleepy—unless it's that aspirin I took—

GRACE

I can't take aspirin, it gives me palpitation—

[STELLA, *glad to escape further comment on the pin, exits to kitchen with some plates.*

ETTA (*as a whistle sounds from area-way*)

Here's Jerry!

PAUL

It's a ridiculous time to come.

WALTER (*calls*)

Walk in! The door's open.

JERRY (*outside*)

Right! (*There is a lively banging of the area-gate, a quick step in the hall, the door bursts wide open and JERRY stands in the doorway. He is young and fresh and clean, and looks amazingly like a youthful VICKIE.*)
Hello, everybody!

[*There is a chorus of greeting.*

JERRY (*advancing into the room*)

Hello, Grandma—

[*Kisses her cheek.*]

MRS. HALLAM (*receiving his kiss a little coolly*)

You have been forgetting your old grandmother—

JERRY (*sweetly*)

Oh, no I haven't, Grandma—but you know how it is—

HELEN

Sure, you know. (*Winks.*) I bet he's crazy about the girls—

JERRY (*kissing her*)

No, I'm not, Aunt Helen, no kidding.

ETTA

That's the truth, he's not girl crazy—they like *him* all right—but he doesn't like them.

JERRY (*crossing to card table*)

Hello, Grandpa—

[*Shakes hands with his uncles.*]

HARRY

Why didn't you come earlier? You missed some good grub.

MRS. HALLAM (*exits into kitchen*)

He will get it anyway. There's plenty here.

JERRY (*throws coat on chair near window*)

Don't you bother, Grandma— (*Coming over behind GRACE's chair.*) Hello, Aunt Grace—

[She pulls him down for a kiss.]

GRACE (*with a look to* WALTER)

Mmn— Quite a thrill to kiss a *young* man again!

[STELLA re-enters from kitchen. JERRY catches sight of her, and for a moment he is confused, and uncertain.]

ETTA

Why that's your Aunt Stella, for goodness' sake. You remember your Aunt Stella. Say how do! Where's your tongue?

STELLA (*in a kind of wonder*)

Oh, he *does* remind me of the way Vickie used to be!

JERRY

Why sure, I remember Aunt Stella. How do, Aunt Stella.

[Crosses to her and bends to kiss her cheek.]

STELLA

Aunt Stella. This makes me feel so old!

JERRY

But if I don't call you Aunt I can't kiss you. Besides you're not a bit *like* an aunt—I mean you're not a bit old or—

GRACE (*indignantly*)

Eh!

HELEN

Go on, go on, Mr. Jerry!

STELLA (*coming swiftly to his rescue*)

He even puts his foot in it the way Vickie used to!

ETTA

His ways are a lot like Vickie's but I don't notice the resemblance so much.

HELEN

Etta means Vickie was never so good looking—

STELLA (*softly*)

Oh yes he was—

MRS. HALLAM (*entering from kitchen with food*)

Come, come, Jerry, eat something!

JERRY

That looks swell! Thanks!

[*Starts to eat with rather charming gusto.*]

MRS. HALLAM

And here's nice celery and olives—

JERRY

Oh, you shouldn't have gone to all that trouble, Grandma!

WALTER

Say, Etta, when's the last time you fed that boy?

[ETTA *has begun to expire with sleep. Looks at* WALTER *vacantly.*]

MRS. HALLAM (*delighted*)

I like to see it. I don't like picking!

GRACE

Hear you're a business man, Jerry!

JERRY (*expressing much*)

Yeah—

VICKIE (*overhearing from card table*)

That's so? Since when?

JERRY (*trying to be gallant about it*)

Oh—Dad decided last week he couldn't get along without me—

VICKIE

So we're not going to have an architect in the family, eh?

JERRY

Doesn't look like it.

STELLA (*arrested*)

Did you really want to study architecture?

JERRY

Gee, I was crazy to. Still want to, about more than anything else in the world.

STELLA

Tell me about it.

MRS. HALLAM (*quickly*)

Come eat, Jerry.

JERRY (*to his grandmother*)

I am. I'm eating a lot. (*To STELLA.*) I thought maybe I'd get a lucky break and go abroad, but I didn't.

HELEN (*interrupting*)

Yes, come on, Jerry—have a piece of this cake, I made it.

JERRY (*mechanically*)

That looks wonderful—thanks, sure I will.

[*Passes his plate.*]

HARRY

Thank God, you've got a customer!

GRACE (*laughs uproariously*)

And what a customer!—Now why doesn't he get fat!—Jerry, why don't you get fat?

[*Pulls JERRY.*]

JERRY (*laughing good naturedly*)

I don't know why I don't get fat.

ETTA (*suddenly*)

I can't keep my eyes open.

HELEN

I ought to wash my hair.

GRACE

Oh say, we saw the cutest movie the other night.

[*STELLA rises from table and drifts over toward card table.*]

VICKIE (*at card table*)

What a lousy hand!

PAUL (*over his father's shoulder*)

Lead your ace, Pop!

VICKIE (*a little impatiently to STELLA*)

Move, Stella, will you, you're in my light.

[*She moves away to seek someone she can talk to, but*

HARRY and WALTER are in close conference, GRACE and HELEN are debating the movie, and ETTA is frankly dozing. STELLA drifts toward the stand of flowers at lower end of couch as if to a refuge. Pretends to arrange them. JERRY, watching her, puts aside the cake plate, and joins her.

JERRY (*touching the flowers admiringly*)

Gee, I noticed them when I came in. They're gorgeous. Who brought 'em?

STELLA

Uncle Vickie and I.

JERRY

I might have known it.

STELLA

Why?

JERRY

I don't know. I guess because Mother usually brings calf's foot jelly or something.

[*They laugh.*]

STELLA (*gravely*)

Jerry, I think I should have brought calf's foot jelly—or something, too.

[*They laugh again, a little guiltily.*]

JERRY (*boyishly*)

You couldn't bring calf's foot jelly—because—you don't seem to belong to these Tuesday evenings. Look, aren't they awful? You just have to sit around and jaw over things that aren't important and eat—and

eat— (*As STELLA smiles.*) Oh, I'm not so crazy about eating as I seem, but I know it tickles Grandma when we eat a lot—

STELLA

You gave a most remarkable performance.

JERRY

No, I mean it, Aunt Stella.

STELLA

I know just how you feel, Jerry.

JERRY

Do you honestly? Before, you know, I was starting to tell you about—

STELLA (*with quick interest*)

Oh yes, about going abroad—go on—what happened?

ETTA (*rousing herself with an effort*)

What are you two hobnobbing about?

JERRY (*continuing to STELLA, without turning*)

Well, first Dad said he'd think it over, and then the family—I don't know, sort of got him out of it—

ETTA (*petulantly*)

Jerry, I'm talking to you.

JERRY (*annoyed at interruption*)

What?

HELEN

You'd think they were long lost friends—

MRS. HALLAM (*who has risen from card table*)

I only hope Stella was not putting ideas into his head.

JERRY (*angrily*)

What do you mean? Can't anybody even—

PAUL (*sternly*)

Careful, Jerry. You're talking to your grandmother.

MRS. HALLAM (*crossing to JERRY*)

Well, come over, don't be like company, sit down—
[*Leads him back toward table.*]

ETTA

Oh don't sit again, Jerry. I've just got to get home to bed—

MRS. HALLAM

But Jerry only just came—

HELEN

I'm dying to sleep too,— Come on Harry—let's—

MRS. HALLAM (*clinging greedily to the evening*)

No—no—it is too early—

HARRY (*scowling at HELEN*)

You can't feed your face and run! What's the matter with you?

HELEN (*resigned*)

Well, give me the pencil in your pocket, Harry.

HARRY (*ungraciously*)

This is my last pencil.

HELEN

It's always your last pencil—give it to me, I won't eat it!

HARRY

No, you chew 'em!

[Gives her pencil reluctantly.]

[JERRY crosses back to STELLA on sofa.]

STELLA

I wish Uncle Vickie would hurry. He's got a hard day tomorrow—

HELEN (*taking newspaper from chair*)

Here it is, looking right at me.

ETTA (*rising and leaning on her elbows across the table*)

Oh, crossword puzzles—after all these years I can just about do 'em.

GRACE (*modestly*)

I'm wonderful at them—let's see

[They huddle over the paper.]

HELEN

Say, Stella, you're an artist, what's an American etcher that begins with W?

STELLA

Whistler—?

ETTA

That's right—I've got his Mother.

JERRY (*eagerly*)

Is that true, you're an artist? Do you paint or anything, Aunt Stella?

HELEN (*happening to look up from puzzle*)

Jerry, you loafer, you haven't finished my cake!

JERRY (*reaching for cake, automatically*)

Do you, Aunt Stella?—Paint?

STELLA

I used to before I was married. I'm beginning again—

JERRY

Gosh, that's nice. You know what I used to want to do when I was a kid?

STELLA

Be a janitor or a car-conductor—

JERRY (*grinning*)

Oh sure. But after that—when I was about eighteen—

STELLA

What?

JERRY

I used to love to make blueprints—design buildings and theatres and things like that—

STELLA

Oh, but that's wonderful, Jerry!

JERRY

Dad couldn't see it, though. Nobody could. They seem to think that anything that has to do with drawing isn't business.

STELLA

But it's natural for your father to want you to carry on for him?

JERRY

Yes. I guess so— Only—

VICKIE (*interrupting from card table*)

All right, Stel', come along, get your duds on!

[*There is a general move toward departure, despite MRS. HALLAM's protests.*]

JERRY (*as STELLA starts to remove her pendant to return it to her bag*)

I was looking at that before, it's beautiful.

[*Takes it in his hand.*]

STELLA

Isn't it?

JERRY

It's old—

STELLA

Very.

JERRY (*holding chain so that they are drawn quite close*)

Isn't that a moonstone in the center?—Imagine people wearing diamonds when there are things like this—

STELLA

And look, Jerry, at the way they used to mount them—

[*Their heads come together over the piece.*]

JERRY (*suddenly*)

You smell like flowers.

STELLA

Don't I know it.—I spilled a whole bottle of perfume over me before I left.

JERRY

I like it. It smells like violets.

STELLA

It is. It's called Mes Belles Violettes—

WALTER (*overhearing and clowning*)

Mes Belles Violettes— Pardonnez moi— Je ne polly vous Française so velly good. *Je* never went to college.

GRACE (*shrieking*)

You crazy loon—just listen to him—say that over again, Wallie.

JERRY (*against her silly laughter*)

Aunt Stella, I'd like to see you sometime, when we can talk by ourselves. I mean I want to ask you about painting and things. Maybe you know of some good exhibitions I could go to. There's nobody much I can talk to—

STELLA

Why of course, Jerry—any time— (*Thinks a moment, then motions to VICKIE.*) Vickie, just a minute, dear—

VICKIE (*pausing on his way to hall*)

What?

STELLA

Vickie, couldn't everyone come down to our place next Tuesday evening.

VICKIE

That's an idea— You ask 'em, Stella! (*VICKIE raises his hand for attention against the mounting talk.*) Look here, people—Stella has something to suggest! Attention!

[*Claps GRACE on shoulder, quite in WALTER's manner, dislodging her pocket-book from under her arm.*]

WALTER (*struggling into his coat and making a great noise about it*)

Friends, Romans, Countrymen! Lend me your ears!

GRACE

Oh, behave you—and pick up my pocket-book, please.

STELLA (*trying to be heard*)

I want you all to come over to our place next Tuesday evening—Jerry's coming, too.

MRS. HALLAM (*instantly*)

No, no, that is too big a trip for an old lady like me. Perhaps if you lived nearer, yes—

MR. HALLAM

Come, Mamma, just this once won't tire you—it's a nice idea of Stella's.

ETTA

Yes, Jerry, you ought to say "thank you" to Aunt Stella for inviting you.

[*JERRY says nothing.*]

STELLA

Then you will come, all of you?

HELEN

I'm willing if the rest are.

GRACE

I'll go— (*Adds to HELEN in an undertone.*) Anything for a change.

HELEN

Way I feel about it.

VICKIE

Fine! Then it's all settled. Our place next Tuesday.

MRS. HALLAM (*firmly*)

I am an old lady. It is better for you young people to come to me.

VICKIE (*coaxingly*)

Come on, Mamma dear. I'll blow you to a taxi.

JERRY (*to STELLA*)

I meant I wanted to talk to you alone, Aunt Stella, not with the whole gang around.

STELLA

Why then,—any time, Jerry—just drop in and have dinner with us.

VICKIE (*with his own and STELLA's coats across his arm*)

Get a move on, Stel'. Here's your coat. Catch!

[*Throws her the coat. STELLA catches it. Starts to put it on. JERRY moves swiftly to her side, and takes it gently from her.*]

JERRY

Allow me, Aunt Stella.

STELLA

Thank you, Jerry.

[JERRY holds the coat for her. STELLA turns to put her arms into the sleeves. But WALTER slips between them, and runs his finger down her spine, with his shrill whistle, as he did earlier to GRACE and HELEN. STELLA makes no outcry, but starts painfully. The others laugh.]

VICKIE

He got you that time, Stel'!

JERRY (*dropping the coat on sofa, and facing WALTER with blazing eyes*)

That's a damn fool trick! You want to watch out what you're doing, do you hear?

[*The others are stunned at the outburst.*]

MRS. HALLAM (*quavering*)

What's gotten into you, Jerry, to talk that way?

PAUL (*sternly*)

Apologize to your uncle this instant!

[JERRY is silent.]

ETTA (*coming down toward JERRY*)

Go on, Jerry, say "Excuse me, Uncle Walter"—you were very fresh, really.

JERRY (*desperately, sullenly*)

I apologize, Uncle Walter.

[*Snatches his hat and coat and leaves abruptly.*]

WALTER (*as he exits*)

Don't mention it, my boy. I know your business troubles make you irritable!

[*The others indulge in a little strained laughter, glad that the tension is broken. They file out.*]

VICKIE (*looking back toward STELLA*)

Well, come on, Stel', get your coat on, let's move.

[*STELLA very slowly puts her coat on and starts toward door as*

CURTAIN SLOWLY FALLS

ACT TWO

ACT TWO

SCENE: VICKIE'S and STELLA'S apartment, the following Tuesday evening. It is an old building near Beekman Place. The living-room is large and square, with high ceiling and old-fashioned trim. It has a gracious lived-in quality, and is furnished with taste and individuality without being in the least bizarre. There are plenty of books, some fine old pieces of English furniture, a lovely hanging, mellow with age, and a Sheraton gate-leg table at right angles to the fireplace, with a large wing-chair opposite. Doorway up Left Center leads to foyer and entrance. Door up Right Center leads to kitchen. Another door, upstage of mantel, leads into bedroom. In the Left part of room there is a modelling stand, with clay, and on a long table, under window Left, are instruments, and some finished pieces. Among them is a plaster head of VICKIE.

At Rise: VICKIE, in dressing gown, is dosing in the armchair down Right. His face, off guard, is heavy and relaxed in sleep. His newspaper has slipped to the floor. STELLA enters from bedroom, tying the loose sleeves of her soft housedress. She glances at VICKIE, sees that he is asleep, and goes quietly into kitchen, which shows only an immaculate square of blue-and-white-linoleum and an ice-box. The telephone rings. She hurries to answer it before it disturbs him. But it is too late. He stirs uneasily and mumbles.

STELLA

Hello— Who?—Oh no— You must have the wrong number. Not at all—

VICKIE

Who was it?

STELLA

Someone for Mr. Jones—

VICKIE

Damn Mr. Jones, I was in the middle of a dream—

STELLA

What a shame—go back and finish it—

VICKIE (*grievedly*)

Can't now, it's spoiled— Anyway, I've got to dress, the folks'll be here soon—

STELLA (*lighting candles*)

It's early, you've got time—

VICKIE (*wanting to be convinced*)

Have I?

STELLA

Loads—

[VICKIE hitches himself around like a huge child, and settles for another nap. The phone rings again. She runs toward it, but VICKIE, aroused once more, is moved to fury.]

VICKIE (*starting out of his chair*)

What's the *matter* with that Central, you let *me* talk to her, damn it!

STELLA (*pushing him back*)

Darling, you'll get a stroke!

VICKIE

You tell her Mr. Jones is *dead*!

STELLA

Yes, dear, I'll tell her. (*Adds, under her breath.*) Idiot! (*He grins at her sheepishly. She picks up phone.*) Hello— Hello, who?—Oh! Jerry! Yes, of course!—Anything wrong?—I don't know, you just sounded that way— No, not a bit really—come along— Good-bye. (*As she hangs up the receiver.*) Funny, I thought it sounded like Jerry's voice before—

VICKIE

What's the matter with him, anyway?

STELLA

He's at Fifty-Ninth Street, could he come right over, ahead of the others—

VICKIE

There goes my nap— Half-past seven. What's the idea, barging in here at half-past seven?

STELLA

I don't know, but he seemed awfully upset.—I think he wants to talk to us, Vickie.

VICKIE

Ten to one he wants to belly-ache.

STELLA (*glad the subject is introduced*)

But they're all so against him. We're the only ones who can help him, so don't close him off—

VICKIE

I'm not going to close him off exactly, but I'm certainly going to mind my own business—and you do the same. Paul wants him over at the factory, and that's all there is to it—

STELLA

But Paul has enough money to let the boy at least *try* to find himself—

VICKIE

And waste the best years of his life trying—

STELLA (*urgently*)

But it wouldn't be waste. Putting him in business, now, when there's so much in him that wants to come out,—that's waste.

VICKIE

Well, if that's the stuff he's been handing out to you, no wonder he's been hanging around here the past week—

STELLA

Once for tea and once to return a book.

VICKIE

And Saturday, you told me—

STELLA

I didn't expect him— (*Smiles a little.*) That was to return another book, and I was leaving for the exhibition so I took him along.

VICKIE

You told me that already. (*Sing-songs.*) How he loved it, and how he's got the makings of an artist, and—

STELLA (*breaking in*)

But really, Vickie, you should have seen his face. It was like a new world to him—

VICKIE

Bologney. A boy of that age oughtn't to be hanging around art galleries. What do you want to do, make a fairy out of him?

STELLA

Vickie, when you talk like that I could just shake you. It's so awfully typical—

VICKIE

Typical of what?

STELLA

Of the kind of mentality that ridicules what it doesn't understand.

VICKIE (*disturbed, and taking refuge in belligerence*)

Oh, so I've got that kind of mentality, eh?

STELLA

I never thought you had—

VICKIE

But you do now—is that it?

STELLA (*quietly*)

I don't know what to think of you any more, Vickie.

VICKIE

Oh, you don't!

STELLA

Sometimes, if I close my eyes, I think it's Harry or Walter talking—

VICKIE

Look here, Stella, I've warned you often enough to leave your opinion of my family out of our conversations—

STELLA

But it isn't the family, it's *you*.—If you're so blind you can't see that Jerry ought to get away to find himself, then . . . (*Pauses and goes on with an effort.*) Something in you that's always been very dear and precious to me has died without my knowing it—

VICKIE (*uncomfortably*)

Well, you're certainly taking the kid's troubles to heart.

STELLA

Because he's so much the way you used to be, Vickie. Maybe that's why I'm so fond of him—

VICKIE

Well, I'm glad you like *somebody* in my family.

STELLA (*simply*)

I could like them all, if they'd only let me—

VICKIE

That's a laugh—

STELLA

No it isn't. I've never fooled myself about the way they feel toward me. They resent me terribly . . .

VICKIE (*breaking in with alacrity*)

Well if they do, it's because you high-hat them, try to make yourself somebody miles above them—!

STELLA (*approaching anger*)

That isn't true, and you know it!—if I were someone miles above them, I could understand their hatred— (*Her anger fades to a kind of poignancy.*) But I'm not—I just want more out of life than waking up in the morning and going to bed at night. Oh, I want a great deal more than that, Vickie— (*She goes to him.*) And I want a great deal more of marriage than the mere routine of a man and woman living together. Because that doesn't have to happen, it shouldn't happen—especially when two people began by loving each other the way we did—

VICKIE

You did used to love me—

STELLA

I still do, more than anything else in the world—

VICKIE

Like fun you do— (*Because he is stirred, he tries to hide it and becomes a little absurd.*) If you did it seems to me you'd give up a few of these fads of yours—

STELLA (*wickedly*)

Art school?

VICKIE (*defiantly*)

Well I don't see where it gets you when it comes right down to it— Nobody's called you a genius exactly—

STELLA

I know I'm not a genius, Vickie. I know just how silly it must seem to your people— But it's my way of helping myself for the time being—

VICKIE

What d'you need help about?

STELLA (*withholding much*)

Plenty.

VICKIE

Say, what's come over you all of a sudden—?

STELLA

It isn't all of a sudden—

VICKIE

You know what's the matter with you, don't you? (*She makes no reply.*) You're just plain garden variety romantic.

STELLA

You can't name it with a word, Vickie—

VICKIE

You can if you're honest enough— Don't you think I know what's in your head?

STELLA (*slowly*)

What's in my head?

VICKIE (*packing his pipe*)

Oh, you want a honeymoon to last forever— But good Lord, Stella, you can't expect that— It's bound to wear off and something a lot better comes in its place—

STELLA

What comes in its place?

VICKIE (*stumped, and a little embarrassed*)

Ach— You know as well as I do—

STELLA

I know this, Vickie, nothing can ever take the place of tenderness and respect—and chivalry. You just stand still without them, or you keep going down, and down, and down—

VICKIE

Bunk, Stella. Honestly, bunk. I'm going to call you Romantic Susie. Come on, kiss me, Romantic Susie—

STELLA

Oh Vickie, be serious. We need a talk, you and I— believe me we do.

VICKIE

Nonsense. I understand you a great deal better than you think I do—

STELLA (*turning away as if in pain too poignant to bear*)

But you don't know what it means to be lonely—

VICKIE (*profoundly touched by the reality of her suffering, but blundering*)

Well what have you got to be lonely about? Afraid

I didn't love you any more? (*Pulls her to him.*) Little fool—

[*His passion is fired.*]

STELLA (*unable to meet his quick desire*)

Vickie—please.

[*Tries to free herself.*]

VICKIE (*huskily; still holding her*)

What's the matter—

STELLA

Nothing— Only this sort of thing doesn't mean anything unless we're close. At least not with me, it doesn't. You ought to know that by this time—

VICKIE (*repulsed and hurt*)

God, I don't know what you want. You're just all balled up— Love, reason, sex—all balled up— (*Veers away from further discussion.*) Well I'm not going to get into any long-winded argument the one night the folks are coming down— Let's have a little light on the subject—

STELLA

We don't need the center light—it's so bright—

VICKIE (*elaborately*)

All right, *anything* you say— But I know the folks, they like to see things—

STELLA (*on a breath*)

Yes—

VICKIE

Say look here, Stel', you're not going to be a crab and spoil the evening are you?

STELLA (*with a resolute change of attitude*)

Vickie, what do you take me for—I want this to be a lovely party!

VICKIE

Got enough food—?

STELLA

Stacks 'n stacks and stacks—

VICKIE

And none of those dinky little sandwiches with the crusts cut off—

STELLA (*solemnly*)

Unh— Unh— Each one of them is like this—

VICKIE (*almost bashfully*)

Ah, who you kidding . . .

[*For a moment, VICKIE shines through with all the sweetness and youngness of their early days. She runs into his arms with a little cry.*]

STELLA

Ah, Vickie . . .

VICKIE (*in a whisper*)

Stel' . . .

STELLA

Every night I pray this prayer— Dear God, bless Vickie whom I love— (*Makes a little face.*) And all my dear in-laws!

VICKIE (*laughing*)

Hey!

STELLA

Better shave, dear, it's getting late.

VICKIE

Shave—? (*Presents his face for inspection.*) Look.
Can't I get by if I powder?

STELLA

No, you can't. Your mother always thinks you look sick when you need a shave.

VICKIE

Oh hell, I suppose I must— You better get dressed too, Stel'—Jerry'll be along any minute.

STELLA

I am dressed.

VICKIE

If you keep that thing on, the folks'll think it's a nightgown— (*Bell rings.*) I told you so, there he is now, Jerry— You open— And listen, Stella, about this bug he's got to go abroad, I don't want you to encourage him.

STELLA (*incredulously*)

Vickie, are you really going to take that stand?

VICKIE

Listen, do you think I'm talking just to hear myself talk?

STELLA (*tensely*)

Oh but it's wrong—

VICKIE (*breaking in*)

Well you butt out of it.—You'd feel swell if the boat went down, or he got in some scrape with a woman over there or something—

STELLA (*hopelessly*)

Oh Vickie!

VICKIE

Well, I mean it!

[*Exits angrily to bedroom, destroying their moment utterly and leaving them, at JERRY's entrance, farther apart than ever.*]

STELLA

Hello, Jerry—

[*JERRY pauses on the threshold. He seems strained and inwardly excited.*]

JERRY

Shall I put my things in the closet?

STELLA

You can just leave them—

[*JERRY throws his coat and hat over hall chair and enters room carrying a crisply wrapped package, which he keeps behind his back.*]

JERRY (*looking around*)

Gosh. The room's beautiful at night. This is the first time I've ever seen it at night, you know. With the candles and everything lit—

STELLA

Well, you sit here and enjoy it. I'm going to change my dress—

JERRY (*quickly*)

No don't—I like it, what you've got on—it makes you look so much taller than you really are—

STELLA (*matter-of-factly*)

Oh I'm pretty husky—

JERRY (*with a small break*)

You're tiny. I could lift you up in one hand—

STELLA

Don't you believe it.

[*Puts her hand on bedroom door, meaning to go in.*]

JERRY

Stella,—please—I want to show you something—

STELLA

Show me later—

JERRY

I—don't want to show you later. When everyone's around. I kept imagining on the way down, me walking in, and you here by yourself—I didn't think it would happen—but it has—so you can't just go in and change your dress—

[*His voice falters; he looks at her beseechingly.*]

STELLA (*after an instant's hesitation*)

Well—what is it, Jerry?

JERRY (*fumbling awkwardly with the package in his hand*)

I feel like a fool now. You didn't act this way on Saturday.

STELLA

Saturday?

JERRY

Gosh—don't you even remember?

STELLA (*aware of his overwrought condition, and careful to keep the scene casual*)

I remember that we went to the exhibition—

JERRY

Is that all?

STELLA

Why yes—

JERRY

I remember more than that. I remember every word you said—and how you looked when you said it—

STELLA

Jerry this is dreadful, you sound like a detective!

JERRY

No, I'm not fooling. Being with you that day made everything different and wonderful—but all it meant to you was—going to an exhibition I guess.

STELLA

Oh no, it didn't, it meant more than that, Jerry. Because I enjoyed seeing the pictures with you—it was

nice being with someone for a change.—It was awfully nice.

[There is wistful, unguarded note in her voice as she adds the last sentence. JERRY is arrested by it, he searches her eyes eagerly. But STELLA's face has suddenly become a mask. She turns a friendly impersonal smile upon him. It quenches JERRY's fire. When he speaks again, the timbre has gone from his voice.]

JERRY

Oh. Well. I see, sure. (*Turns away in disappointment.*) I'm just crazy, I guess. Forget it, will you, Stella? I came in here, just sort of crazy, that's all—

STELLA (*not disputing it*)

What was it you wanted to show me, Jerry?

JERRY (*very young, with his back to her*)

Nothing. It wouldn't mean anything to you. Never mind.

[Turns half toward her, twanging the string of his package, as if he wishes she'd take it from him.]

STELLA (*smiling*)

Is this it?

[Takes the package.]

JERRY (*in his throat*)

Umm.

STELLA (*uncertain*)

Shall I open it?

JERRY (*inarticulate*)

Sure. If—if you want.

STELLA

It's—soft!

[*A beautiful little grin comes over JERRY's tense young features.*]

JERRY

Go ahead. See what it is.

[*STELLA unwraps it, and brings to light an enchanting English puppy made of plush. It is at once non-sensical and appealing.*]

STELLA (*taken unawares*)

Oh!

JERRY (*his face transfigured*)

Do you remember it?

STELLA

Of course I remember it— (*She has forgotten JERRY, forgotten the dog; her mind is in some hinterland of space.*) We were walking over Fifty-seventh Street—after the exhibition—it was in a shop window—

JERRY (*taking it swiftly, and with laughter*)

And you were like a little kid, the way you stopped and laughed at it—

STELLA

I've always had a weakness for toy-stores—

JERRY (*his voice trembling with happiness*)

And you said—"Oh, Jerry, Look! Isn't it adorable!"—and I knew right away that I'd have to surprise you with it!

STELLA (*turning her eyes upon him as if she has come back from a long distance; speaking slowly*)

But you shouldn't have done it, Jerry—

JERRY

D-don't you like it?

STELLA

I love it. It's one of the sweetest things that ever happened to me, your surprising me this way. But it won't do, you see. (*She tries to smile.*) It just won't do.

JERRY

Why you're crying!

STELLA

Nonsense! Why should I cry—over a funny little dog?

JERRY (*at a loss; his eyes wide*)

I don't know!

STELLA (*starting to wrap it up again*)

Neither do I.

JERRY

Do you really mean you won't keep it—Stella, you're not *angry*?

STELLA

Jerry—no dear— Only I don't want you to spend your money on me. It must have been expensive.

JERRY

That's not the reason. You're just making that up . . .

STELLA

Well then—I'm your aunt—little boys oughtn't to buy things for their aunts. It ought to be the other way around, if anything!

JERRY

But you're not my aunt. I mean, not *really* you're not! There's no relationship between us, I mean!

STELLA (*achieving an impersonal note*)

Oh, but there is! I have a lot of interest in you, Jerry. I'm just rooting for you to go abroad—with the whole family glaring at me to mind my own business.

JERRY (*impulsively*)

Well, I wish you would—I mean—I don't want to go—

STELLA

Why Jerry!

JERRY (*blurting it out defiantly*)

If I went it would mean I couldn't see you any more.

STELLA

Well, you're a fine one— You decide to be a big fat business man with a tummy and a radio—and you blame it on me.

JERRY (*in agony*)

You're making fun of me—you're treating me like a child.

STELLA (*sternly*)

You're acting like a child, Jerry—

JERRY (*turning away*)

Gosh, I didn't know I was going to feel this way about you. Even when I bought the dog, it was only fun, surprising you— And then I went into a phone booth to see if I could come right over with it. It must have happened then—because—when I heard your voice—such a funny feeling came over me that—that I couldn't talk—I lost my breath sort of—so I said, "Is Mr. Jones there—"

VICKIE (*off-stage. Loudly and sharply*)

Stella!

STELLA (*after a moment*)

What is it, dear—

[VICKIE, in shirt sleeves, appears upon the threshold. He is in one of his irrational rages over nothing.]

VICKIE

Where the devil's my clothes-brush— Oh hello, Jerry—I left it in my closet on the nail, what'd you do with it?

STELLA

I didn't take it, it must still be there—

VICKIE

Well it's not I tell you— Damn it I bet anything you swept the furniture with it—

STELLA (*hiding the fact that he is hurting her*)

I bet anything I didn't. I bet anything it's right where you left it—

VICKIE

Don't tell *me*. I've been looking high and low!

STELLA

Wait a minute.

[*Goes into bedroom.*

[JERRY'S agitation is increased by a smouldering anger toward VICKIE. He presents an outward appearance that more than justifies VICKIE'S impression that he has come over to "belly-ache."

VICKIE (*to JERRY*)

Well, *you* look like a ray of sunshine to come to a party—(JERRY makes no reply, moves away. VICKIE follows him up, and lays a not unkindly hand on his shoulder.) Matter Kid? (Still JERRY makes no reply; VICKIE continues.) Find it a little hard to get accustomed to business, eh?

JERRY (*forcing himself*)

A little—

VICKIE

Grouching about it's not going to get you any place—

JERRY (*feeling VICKIE'S touch intolerable*)

Oh you don't know anything about it—

[*Jerks away from him.*

VICKIE

Oh go on. I was young once too—

[STELLA returns.

STELLA (*holding out the whisk-broom to VICKIE*)

Here, Helpless.

VICKIE (*suspiciously*)

Where'd you find it—

STELLA

In your closet, just where you'd left it.—You'd hung your vest over it—

VICKIE

Tell me I'm blind—

[*Exits—slamming bedroom door.*]

JERRY

I'd like to kill him, treating you like that!

STELLA (*with an effort*)

Jerry don't be silly. (*Pause.*) Uncle Vickie and I love each other very dearly— We—we're not romantic any more—(*She stops, then goes on bravely, repeating VICKIE's words of earlier in the evening.*) But romance doesn't mean anything. It wears off and something much better comes in its place—

JERRY

I don't believe that. And you don't believe it either! It's just that he doesn't understand things about you—he doesn't know how to make you happy.

STELLA (*with finality*)

I am very happy—

JERRY (*gropingly*)

Then—Saturday was all a dream—I mean I only imagined that—

STELLA (*her feelings get the better of her*)

No, you didn't imagine it, Jerry. It was wonderful. I

did love it. Oh, but I must have been mad—I was under a spell, as if Time had gone back seven years— It wasn't *you* I was happy with, Jerry, it was Uncle Vickie—don't you see?

JERRY (*trying to take it all in*)

Then there isn't any place for me at all—

STELLA

No, Jerry. (*There is a deep silence, while JERRY turns away, struggling with his heart-break. STELLA goes to him.*) Jerry. Listen to me. You're not in love with me the way you think. (*He wheels in denial.*) Oh no you're not! I'm just taking the place of the girl you will love some day. Now you're—lonely I guess—and you're dazzled by the experience of talking to someone who understands the things you want to say—

JERRY

Would that make me suffer the way I'm suffering now?

STELLA (*simply*)

I think so—

JERRY (*with sudden overwhelming penetration*)

Would it make *you* suffer the way you're suffering—?

STELLA

Jerry! Stop it!

JERRY (*wildly, triumphantly*)

I won't stop it! I know what you're doing! You're treating me like a child because you're afraid! You're afraid of yourself, and you're afraid of me!

STELLA (*struggling against him*)

Jerry—

JERRY (*pleading*)

Ah Stella, there's nothing wrong about it, Stella—we didn't ask it to come—it just happened—like something natural and beautiful—

STELLA (*hoarsely*)

Jerry, don't—leave me alone—please—

[*She realizes that his touch spells peril for her. Blindly, she picks up a book, and puts it in book-case, trying to conquer herself. VICKIE enters from bedroom, drawing on his coat. He is fresh, and spruce and satisfied with himself.*]

VICKIE (*smugly*)

Here we are—

STELLA (*with too much composure in her voice*)

Did you leave the room tidy, Vickie—in case the folks go in there—?

VICKIE

It's all right— (*Catches sight of the partially wrapped dog on the chair. Picks it up, looks at it, and chuckles.*) They certainly can make stuff these days—where'd it come from?

[*He looks from JERRY to STELLA. JERRY doesn't answer.*]

STELLA

Jerry bought it for his girl. He opened it for me to see.

[*Takes the dog from VICKIE, and wraps it up, tying string around it.*

VICKIE (*with a broad wink*)

Oh ho! So there's a girl in this, too! Well, women like this kind of nonsense— Didn't I once buy you something like that when we were first married, Stella?

STELLA (*her eyes on the package she is wrapping; in a still voice*)

Yes. I think you did, Vickie.

VICKIE

It was some kind of a stuffed animal, a pig or a rabbit—

STELLA

It was a kitten with a blue ribbon round its neck—

VICKIE

That's right! I threw away five bucks on it without batting an eye-lash.

STELLA (*quietly*)

You didn't throw it away, Vickie, because I still have the kitten. On a top shelf in a box.

VICKIE

You still got it? Women are nuts, all right! Careful, Jerry, better go easy!—What's her name?

JERRY (*choked*)

There isn't any girl—the way you mean—

STELLA

Don't tease him, Vickie, please!

VICKIE

He's elected! Look at him!—No wonder he wants to set the world on fire. (*Slaps JERRY's back.*) It's all right, old man, you're not the first one to fall— How old is she?

STELLA

Let him alone, it's unkind!

VICKIE

You're in soft with your Aunt Stella, d'you know it?

STELLA

Vickie, don't! He's unhappy! You've got to help him go away— Please!

VICKIE (*as the bell rings*)

I told you how I felt, didn't I?

STELLA (*desperately*)

But I want you to change you mind— For my sake—

VICKIE (*anxious to open door*)

Oh drop it— (*To JERRY.*) You'll only upset Grandma carrying around a face like that—

[*Exits.*

JERRY (*beside himself as voices sound in the hall*)

I have to get out of here—I can't stand it—

[*But it is too late. The HALLAMS come trooping in, all but PAUL and ETTA. There is a chorus of greetings, under cover of which JERRY snatches the dog and puts it in a drawer, safe from their jeering eyes.*

CHORUS

Hello, Vickie!

Why don't you live over in civilization, anyway?

Yeah, we could of bought a taxi for what it cost us to wait for the traffic lights!

Hello, Stella—

VICKIE

Hello, Mamma, Hello Pop!

STELLA

Hello, everybody! (*Tries to do better.*) I'm so glad— come in— (*Kisses* MRS. HALLAM) It's wonderful to have you here at last, Mother.

VICKIE

Where's Paul?

STELLA

Yes, where are Etta and Paul?

CHORUS

HELEN: Didn't Jerry tell you?

GRACE: Don't you know what happened?

VICKIE (*to* STELLA)

No. Did he tell *you*?

JERRY (*with his back to them—at mantel*)

I forgot.

MRS. HALLAM

That is not a very nice thing to forget, Jerry!

[*Drops down into a chair; nobody notices her for they are busy explaining about* ETTA and PAUL.]

GRACE

Etta's sister Marion, was rushed to the hospital at about—when was it, Wallie?

WALTER (*tying his shoe*)

About six— They operated right away—

STELLA

Really? What was the matter?

HARRY

Appendix.

HELEN

Ruptured, if you ask me— They don't rush them on the table like that for nothing—

GRACE

But fevvin's sake, Jerry, how on earth did you happen to forget to tell Aunt Stella?

VICKIE (*doing his best for JERRY*)

Aw, lay off the kid. He's in love!

[*And now this bit of news intrigues them. They become busy with it, their voices reaching a crescendo.*]

CHORUS

HARRY: Oh, so that's it!

HELEN: Who is it, Jerry, out with it!

WALTER: Ah *Ha!*

STELLA (*forcing her voice above the din. Importunately*)

Please—everyone! Take your things off! Vickie, help the boys put their coats in the closet— Grace, you and Helen lay your coats any where. I'll take them later. Here, Mother, let me help you—

VICKIE

Yes, come along.

[*The MEN go into the foyer, JERRY crosses to bookshelves where he pretends to read. STELLA starts to assist MRS. HALLAM, but the old lady waves her away.*

MRS. HALLAM (*faintly*)

A moment—let me rest a moment—

STELLA (*alarmed*)

I'll get some spirits of ammonia!

HELEN (*expecting it*)

Don't bother. (*Opens MRS. HALLAM's purse, draws out smelling salts. Puts them matter-of-factly beneath the old lady's nose.*) Sniff, Gran'ma. (*To STELLA.*) She's all right, leave her alone.

VICKIE (*as he re-enters with the men*)

What's wrong, Mamma?

WALTER

Is she faint?

MR. HALLAM

Come, come, Mamma, brace up.

MRS. HALLAM (*opening her eyes, smiling wanly at them*)

I am all right. It is nothing, my boys. The stairs, I guess.

HARRY

That's it, the steps were too much for her—

WALTER

Climbing up here—the steps—

VICKIE

You stretch out on the bed, inside. Let me carry you.

MRS. HALLAM

No, no, I can walk. I can walk.

[Struggles to her feet, walks toward bedroom, flanked on all sides by her sons. THEY exit.]

STELLA *(looking after them with a puzzled frown)*

But it was only one flight up, and she's used to stairs in a private house.

HELEN

She made up her mind last week already that these particular stairs would be too much for her.

[VICKIE appears at bedroom door.]

VICKIE

Get a little ice, will you, Stella?

[STELLA goes into kitchen. GRACE and HELEN drift toward the open door, stand curiously on the threshold.]

HELEN

I like your linoleum, is it new?

GRACE *(ogling the sandwiches)*

Look, will you! You shouldn't have gone to all that fuss.

STELLA

I didn't fuss.

GRACE

Oh no. With a pile of sandwiches as high as the ceiling.

STELLA

Try one.

GRACE

Ummm— Caviar. Delicious—

HELEN

Gran'ma loves caviar.

[*Hurries into kitchen for one also.*]

GRACE (*pleasantly, as she comes back into living-room*)

Get rid of all your cock-roaches?

STELLA

Haven't had one in two years.

GRACE

Cock-roaches don't mean dirt—even though a lot of people think they do. They come from dampness.

HELEN (*with authority*)

They come from the people upstairs. (*Sits on divan.*)
Even I have 'em, on and off. And Lord knows I'm particular about my kitchen.

STELLA

Well, we're definitely exterminated.

GRACE (*helpfully*)

Not that you ever are.

STELLA

Excuse me, I'll take this in to Mother.

[*Exit to bedroom with ice.*]

GRACE (*looking around*)

I wish we could have a little light!

HELEN

Well for heaven's sake, are you a cripple? Where's the switch—oh there it is—

[Puts up center light.]

GRACE

The furniture doesn't even match!

HELEN (*readily*)

How'd you like the dress she's wearing?

GRACE

It was all I could do to keep a straight face.

HELEN

Oh she just likes to be different. (*She has wandered to the table which holds STELLA's art materials. Lifts cloth.*) Look here!

GRACE

My Lord.

HELEN (*staring at a torso*)

This isn't bad, but what is it?

[THEY laugh.]

GRACE

Look! That's Harry!

[Points to head.]

HELEN

It does look like Harry, I swear, absolutely!

GRACE

What if you were to discover your husband is carrying on an affair with Stella!

[*This is excruciatingly funny.*]

HELEN

Can y' *imagine* the excitement in the Hallam family!

[*The men enter from bedroom.*]

WALTER

What are you two hyenas laughing at?

HELEN

I've discovered my husband's head on Stella's table!

VICKIE

Don't flatter him, that's me.

HARRY (*examines it*)

It's got a little of me in it tho', all right. Not bad—(*Puts it back on table smugly.*) Well, that's one thing that the Hallam men *don't* do—run around with other women.

WALTER (*stretched out on divan*)

'S' fact. Us Hallams keep clear of scandal.

HELEN

Is it virtue or dumbness? (*Adds to GRACE.*) Dumbness, I guess.

MRS. HALLAM (*entering quietly from bedroom*)

Don't bother about me, children.

[*The boys rush to her, and escort her to divan.*]

[*STELLA re-enters.*]

MR. HALLAM (*passing the bookshelves*)

Well, Jerry.

[*Puts his hand kindly on the boy's shoulder. Then crosses to the large arm chair Down Right and withdraws himself.*]

WALTER (*to HARRY and VICKIE as they get MRS. HALLAM settled*)

C'm'ere, and I'll tell you a good one.

[*The three of them exit foyer and put their heads together.*]

MRS. HALLAM (*a little petulantly*)

Why don't you come over here in the light, Jerry, where people can see you?

JERRY

I'm all right here, Grandma.

[*Buries himself in book again.*]

MRS. HALLAM

You are not being very polite to your Aunt Stella.

STELLA (*hastily, nervously*)

Oh—mother really—I don't mind.

HELEN (*looking toward the foyer at the sound of sudden guffaws*)

I think they're telling a naughty story.

GRACE (*as the men come back into room*)

Ooh—is it the one you told me last night, Wallie?
That was a bad one—

WALTER

That was tame— (*Looks around.*) Why all the candles?—Got money to burn?

MR. HALLAM

It is a beautiful room. Quiet, and restful.

MRS. HALLAM

You eat your meals here, too, Stella?

STELLA

Yes. It's a combined living and dining room.

MRS. HALLAM

I like a dining room, separate.

STELLA

Yet you always use your dining room as a living room, anyway, Mother.

MRS. HALLAM (*with dignity*)

That is different. We have a parlor.

WALTER (*making an inquisitive tour of the room*)

What's this, Vickie? (*Picks up a kind of a valise which stands in the corner next to gate-leg table.*) Oh, it's a Vickie-to-rola!

VICKIE

Yeap, one of those little Orthophonic ones.

STELLA (*with alacrity*)

Want to hear it?

HARRY

Sure, let's hear how the tone compares with our big one.

VICKIE

All right, bring it over here!—Good little machine for the money—you'd be surprised.

[WALTER puts it on work table, pushing everything aside to make room for it.]

GRACE

Honestly, that's cute, isn't it?

HELEN

Got any records?

VICKIE

There are some in here, aren't there, Stella?

[Opens little compartment in the cover.]

STELLA

A few, I think.

GRACE

Play something, I'd like a little music.

[They arrange themselves to listen. VICKIE puts on a record at random. It is an orchestral symphony.]

MR. HALLAM straightens in his chair at the fine authority of the opening measure. The others look discouraged.

HARRY

What's the name of that record?

STELLA

Beethoven—

WALTER

I knew it was highbrow.

GRACE

Play something good—haven't you got anything good?

HELEN (*with friendly scorn*)

By anything good, my sister-in-law means something that isn't classical. (*Picks out another record.*) Oh say, I love this—

GRACE

What is it?

HELEN

Wedding of the Painted Doll—

GRACE

My God, that's ten years old about—

HELEN

I don't care—I like it anyway.

WALTER

Yes, put it on, what's the difference.

[VICKIE complies. *The Painted Doll opens piquantly; it intrigues them; then, as the music swings into a half-jazz, half melodious rhythm, each one marks time with head, or toe, or finger.*

MRS. HALLAM

Very sweet. Very pretty.

HELEN

Isn't it? In a minute, you'll hear a little strain of the Wedding March—

GRACE

Yes, listen for it—

[They listen intently until the refrain comes, and then look at each other and nod as if they'd done something to bring it about. Suddenly HELEN, quite drunk with the rhythm, begins to sway, and very soon the impulse to dance overcomes her. She one-steps her large, awkward body in her husband's direction, and firmly clutches him about the waist.]

HELEN

C'mon, Harry, let's dance, we're not so ancient. Let's show 'em!

HARRY (*poor at fun*)

Get out—I can't dance any more.

HELEN

Sure you can, you used to be a good dancer.

HARRY

I'll waltz.

MRS. HALLAM (*pleased, and proud*)

Yes, waltz, Harry, let me see you!

[They start to waltz, but the music compels them to an absurd, jumpy two-step which exhausts them after a single round.]

WALTER

Come on, Grace. We'll show 'em!

[He whisks the fat GRACE into his arms.]

GRACE (*thrilled, and a little coy*)

Oh, Walter, I'm rotten at the new dances and you know it!

WALTER

Just keep in time, and follow me!

[*After a few moments, their bodies manage a kind of rhythm, and they dance in deadly earnest. They bounce, and strain, and pump their arms, but they undoubtedly achieve a dance. GRACE'S large behind is more than ever in evidence, but her face is limned with a brooding softness, as if she were feeling herself to be young, and slim, and graceful. MR. and MRS. HALLAM smile and applaud.*]

HARRY (*panting; discovering he's been cheated*)

'S' no waltz! You can't waltz to this!

MRS. HALLAM (*as HARRY and HELEN weaken*)

No, no, don't stop, it is so nice, keep it up!

HELEN (*with fatigue and laughter*)

Oh, I'm dead—let me stop, Harry! I'm dizzy! (*They come to a stop. HARRY mops his brow, HELEN sinks into a chair, fanning her hot face with a handkerchief.*)

Come on, Harry, give me a kiss!

HARRY

Look at Walter, Walter's good!

[*Permits HELEN to pull him down for a kiss. MRS. HALLAM beams.*]

HELEN

That ought to take you down around the hips, Grace!

MRS. HALLAM

Come, Vickie, why aren't you dancing, you must dance with your wife!

HELEN

Yes, Vickie and Stella—

VICKIE

I'm winding the victrola.

HELEN (*shoving him away*)

I'll wind.

VICKIE (*loathing it, but unwilling to be called a wet-blanket at his own party*)

Well, come on, Stella— (*STELLA holds out her arms to him. They start to dance, but meet with instant mishap. VICKIE, who is no clown, is overcome with embarrassment. He loses step, and drags to a stand still. Covers his chagrin by calling Stella to account.*)
Who's leading, you or me?

STELLA (*in a low voice*)

You, darling—

VICKIE

I guess we're rotten—

HELEN

You used to dance good together, you two—

VICKIE

When did you ever see us dance?

HELEN (*with a new note in her laughter*)

You danced at your wedding—and you held her tight, all right!

[*GRACE and WALTER are ready to drop. MRS. HALLAM is disappointed that the gaiety must stop, so MR. HALLAM rises from the big arm chair.*]

MR. HALLAM

May I have the honor, Madame?

MRS. HALLAM

Oh, Papa! (*He helps her to her feet, and they dance a few measures. The others show their delight. Festivity has not faded out. It renews in laughter and mutual approval.*) Enough, Papa, enough!

[*He lifts her hand to his lips in a courtly manner.*

WALTER

Bravo, the belle of the ball!

[*Kisses GRACE loudly.*

GRACE (*coughing, with her pudgy hand against her chest*)

Who's next—Vickie and Stella, you didn't dance—

VICKIE

You ought to know we did—

MRS. HALLAM (*insatiable; her eyes lighting on JERRY*)

Come, Jerry, what is the matter with you? You must dance. Dance with one of your aunts!

HELEN

Yes, show us some new steps, Jerry— This is getting to be a real party.

WALTER (*slapping JERRY strongly on the back*)

That's right. Forget your troubles and tread the light fantastic!

VICKIE (*pushing STELLA a little*)

Good idea— Here, you can have my wife as a partner!

MRS. HALLAM (*with satisfaction*)

Now, we will see something—

HARRY

The two youngest ought to be able to give a pretty good performance!

STELLA

Please—no—

[Her breath comes quickly; her eyes are a little dilated with fear; she is afraid to trust JERRY and herself to the situation.]

MRS. HALLAM (*insistently*)

If an old lady like me—

HELEN

Don't be silly, Stella,—go on—

WALTER (*shoving JERRY toward STELLA*)

Come along, Jerry, ask the lady pretty.

STELLA

No—I'm tired.

MRS. HALLAM (*sighing*)

Stella is always tired.

VICKIE (*impatiently*)

Oh be a sport, Stel'— (*In an aside.*) Why do you have to spoil the fun all the time?

GRACE

Vickie's right—go on, Jerry, just make her dance!

[During all this, JERRY has stood motionless at the book-shelves, his eyes upon STELLA, waiting. Now he slowly puts the book he has been holding upon the table, and quietly crosses the room. Deliberately, and

without saying a word, he holds out his arms to her, and as if mesmerized by the crowding, expectant faces around her, she takes a forward step, and drifts into his waiting embrace. Smoothly, beautifully, they glide into the rhythm. He holds her tenderly, reverently, his eyes closed, their faces touching in a wordless kiss. This that they are doing becomes more than a dance. It is a fulfillment of dreams and longing, a touching of the rainbow, a brief paradise of ecstasy. If the others gradually become aware of something strange, unreal—it comes through to them only as a distilled, disturbing beauty. They watch in silence, not untinged with awe, and are satisfied to call it “fine.” A spell is on the room. STELLA and JERRY, wrapped in oblivion, linger in each other’s arms, their cheeks still touching—and no one says a word. Then WALTER, not knowing what it is all about, becomes uncomfortable.

WALTER (*on the last few strains of music*)

Well, they win the dance—

HARRY

They ought to get a loving cup!

HELEN

Harry says they ought to get a loving cup!

[*The ad libbing is steadily mounting.*]

GRACE

Yes— What’ll it be? Wallie—find something!

WALTER

What’ll we give ’em, huh?

HARRY

Here! This looks like one!

[Picks up small vase.]

WALTER

No—this! I've found something!

[Takes plaster model of Vickie's head.]

HELEN

That's great!

WALTER *(bearing it across the room)*

Sure, because it's hollow—just like Vickie's head!

[This is extremely funny, and their feelings, so unwontedly stimulated, find relief in delirious laughter, and thus JERRY is shaken out of his heaven by the harsh shrieks, and opens his eyes to find the clay head of Vickie thrust, like a mocking symbol, into his hands. He stares at it for an instant, swept by emotions too complex for him to handle. Then he dashes it to the ground, where it smashes in little pieces.]

JERRY

Damn you! *(Sweeps them all in youthful, violent censure.)* Damn all of you! *(Pushes free of WALTER, and stumbles blindly out of the room— He is gone, the door slamming behind him, before the others can recover from their stunned amazement.)*

WALTER *(sputtering)*

This is the second time he's done that to me!

HARRY *(outraged)*

We oughtn't to let him get away with it, I'll get him back!

VICKIE

No, I'll get him back—!

STELLA (*incoherently*)

Oh no, no please—let him go—! It was just practice work, I don't care—

VICKIE (*indignantly*)

You don't care, but I do! Just because he's got a grouch on the world, he can't go round smashing things up in my house!

STELLA (*entreatingly*)

But he didn't know what he was doing—

HELEN (*shrewdly*)

I bet anything Stella knows what ails him—

[*They are diverted from JERRY'S exit and turn to look at STELLA in quick suspicion.*]

STELLA (*fencing*)

Yes—yes I do—! He's terribly unhappy—

VICKIE (*angrily, breaking in before she can excuse him*)

Hell, no excuse for this, he's just a damn sore pup because he can't get his own way—

HARRY (*to VICKIE*)

What's eating him?

VICKIE (*generalizing with a large sweep*)

Ach, you know—he's dissatisfied over at the factory . . .

GRACE

Carrying on for *that*, imagine!

MRS. HALLAM (*in great agitation*)

I blame Etta. She gives in to him— She spoils him—

WALTER

He ought to be thrashed—

HARRY

And Paul ought to see that he gets it good and plenty—

STELLA

Oh you fools! You damn fools!

MRS. HALLAM

I thought so. Stella has been encouraging him for all she is worth—

STELLA

And if I have, is it any worse than what you've done!

VICKIE (*starting forward*)

What are you saying . . .

MRS. HALLAM (*shaking with indignation*)

One minute, Vickie, I would like to hear what it is that we have done—

[*She rises with difficulty, and faces STELLA. It is at last an open declaration between them.*]

STELLA (*she looks at VICKIE but he turns away*)

If you really want to know I'll tell you— You're all so sure of yourselves! You're trying to mould Jerry's life to fit your own and it's wrong! I know what I'm talking about because you've done the same to Vickie and me and you *mustn't*! You've got to let the three of us alone— You've got to let Vickie and me keep our marriage the way it started out— It's the only thing that'll save us. . . .

MRS. HALLAM (*breaking in*)

Enough please—I have heard enough.

[*She feels for her chair and sinks into it with a little moan, resorting to her one sure weapon.*]

HARRY (*furiously to VICKIE*)

I think your wife's lost her mind!

WALTER (*to GRACE*)

Get a little water for Mamma—

[*GRACE goes into kitchen, reluctant to miss the excitement.*]

STELLA (*seeking the refuge of VICKIE's arms*)

Vickie, you know what I'm driving at, you know I'm right— Make them see it—

VICKIE (*ignoring her plea, his nostrils dilated with anger*)

Shut up, can't you!— Look what you've done! (*Rushes to his mother's side, then wheels back to STELLA.*) Make some excuse for your actions, can't you—

STELLA (*through dead lips*)

No—

[*Goes into bedroom and closes door.*]

MRS. HALLAM (*playing up to VICKIE's concern*)

I am going. I am going home. (*Rises as VICKIE tries to hold her in chair.*) No, Vickie, do not stop me. I cannot stay after such insults.

VICKIE (*coaxingly*)

Ah come on, Mamma, you don't want to go home like this—

MRS. HALLAM (*relentlessly*)

My coat please—

VICKIE

God this makes me feel rotten, I don't know what's got into her!

MRS. HALLAM (*with supreme justification*)

It doesn't surprise me at all. I have known from the beginning what she is.

MR. HALLAM

Now Mamma, Stella was excited— Sit down a moment; be quiet—

HELEN (*brusquely*)

Yes come on, Gran'ma, be a sport. Forgive and forget.

WALTER

Look at all the money we paid to get here.

GRACE

And all those sandwiches. You don't want them to go to waste, do you?

MRS. HALLAM

If you can take it as a joke, I can't!

HARRY

I don't think it's any joke either—

GRACE

But f'evvins sake, Gran'ma, the party hasn't hardly begun yet.

HELEN (*giving it up*)

Oh you can't stop her.

HARRY (*to HELEN*)

You get ready, too.

MRS. HALLAM

My gloves—where are my gloves?

HELEN

Here, in your pocketbook.

WALLIE (*to GRACE in an undertone*)

Well, what do you want to do?

GRACE

Might as well taxi over with the rest, don't you think?

MRS. HALLAM (*going to VICKIE and lifting her face for his kiss*)

Good-bye, my boy—I know it is not your fault.—
Come up soon; your mother is always happy to have you—

VICKIE

Sure—I'll phone—or something—later.

GRACE (*to HELEN*)

Well, it was exciting while it lasted.

HELEN

Yep, and she had spunk all right!

VICKIE (*to* MRS. HALLAM)

You rest when you get home—

WALTER

We'll look after her— S'long, Vick—

VICKIE

So long—

HELEN

Good-bye. Don't you worry—

VICKIE

'Bye— (*To* GRACE, *with a gallant effort.*) 'Bye— Fatty! (*They file out, single file, HARRY last, with a commiserate glance at his brother. The door closes behind them. The room is empty and very quiet. VICKIE looks about him as if viewing the desolate battlefield of what was to have been an evening's triumph. Anger and humiliation flare anew. He stalks to the bedroom door, and flings it wide open.*) You can come out now— They've gone. (*No answer from within.*) Stella!—

[STELLA *appears on threshold. She is very still.*

STELLA (*with equal, but quiet command in her voice*)

Don't use that tone to me, Vickie.

VICKIE (*taken aback. Staring at her in unwilling admiration*)

So that's going to be your line— Why you ought to be glad I even give you the chance to explain—!

STELLA

There's nothing to explain. I needed you. But you didn't love me enough to know about it.

VICKIE

Love you enough! When it comes to love, I wouldn't talk! The one single thing I've asked of you in our married life, is to be decent to my folks! Ho! "I want this to be a lovely party, Vickie!" (*He imitates her.*) And what do you do?—The first time my mother's been to my home in over two years, you insult her so that she has to leave!

STELLA

I wish it needn't have happened that way this evening.—But maybe it's just as well for all of us to know exactly where we're at.

VICKIE (*snatching the opportunity*)

Yes, and I'll be the first to tell you where *you're* at. You're going to do as *I* say hereafter! For seven years I've let you make a monkey out of me, twist me around your little finger—

STELLA (*hopelessly*)

Oh Vickie—don't—What's the sense—

VICKIE

The truth hurts, doesn't it? Well, it's my final word. Tonight was the turning point between you and me if anyone should happen to ask you! And I'll leave you to think that over—

[*Turns to the hall with a righteous expulsion of the chest. Comes back with his hat on his head, and his coat over his arm.*]

STELLA

Where are you going?

VICKIE (*magnanimously*)

If I did what you deserved, I'd say it was none of your business where I'm going— But if you really want to know, I'm going up to the folks—

STELLA

Vickie, if you go up there now, we'll *never* get back to where we were!

VICKIE (*very pleased with the calm, strong way he is handling the situation*)

You've got the cart before the horse, my dear. It's up to *you*, now, to make the first move to get back to where we were. My slate's clean. I've been as good a husband as any man could be to any woman—

STELLA

Have you, Vickie?

[*The fire is gone from her. The weary droop of her shoulders, and the dry sorrow in her eyes gives the look of one who is with her dead. To STELLA, it is suddenly over.*

VICKIE (*for whom it has just begun. Expanding again*)
And haven't I—? Haven't I, I ask you? I've given you everything you ever wanted. I don't gamble, I don't drink, I don't cheat— Good God, I don't know that other women even exist— (*The bell rings. He breaks off.*) Who the devil's that—!

[*Stamps out to open the door. JERRY enters. Brushes past VICKIE.*

JERRY (*offstage. Huskily*)

Where's Aunt Stella, I've got to speak to Aunt Stella—

VICKIE

Look here, Kid, pretty lousy thing you did, losing your temper.

JERRY

I know it—that's why I came back— (*He has gained the threshold and goes straight to STELLA—takes her hands.*) I'm sorry I did that, it was rotten of me—

STELLA (*wanting to hide her plight from him*)

It doesn't matter—don't talk about it—

VICKIE (*transferring his anger from JERRY to STELLA*)

When it comes right down to it, I blame your aunt Stella more than I blame you—

JERRY

You don't know what you're saying, she didn't have anything to do with it!—

VICKIE

I know this much, she did her level best to egg you on against the family—

STELLA (*wincing*)

Please Vickie. *Not* in front of Jerry!—

VICKIE

A hell of a lot you spared *me* this evening!

JERRY (*hoarsely*)

You can't talk to her that way, it's my fault, I tell you!

STELLA (*almost pushing him out of the room*)

Oh Jerry, keep quiet—get out—go away—I don't want you here!

VICKIE (*in a tone of authority*)

You stay exactly where you are, Jerry! (*To STELLA.*) And listen. If my nephew has the decency to come back and say he's sorry, you at least have the decency to hear him out. I've stood as much insult to the members of my family as I'm going to stand!

STELLA

But Jerry and I have nothing more to say to each other— He has nothing to do with what's happened between us—it's you and I who need to talk—

VICKIE (*with the upper hand*)

Oh, no we don't—I told you, I've said my say—I'm *through* until you come to your senses!

[*Swoops up his hat and coat with a gesture and starts for the door.*]

JERRY (*aghast; takes a step after him*)

Gee Uncle Vick, you can't do this to Aunt Stella—

VICKIE (*for STELLA's benefit.*)

It's all right, your aunt and I understand each other perfectly— (*Directly to STELLA.*) And as for Jerry you might try as long as he's here, to undo a little of the mischief you began— Let him see where a lot of idiotic notion land you! Good-night!

[*Turns on his heel, goes out of the door, and closes it firmly behind him.*]

JERRY

I'm going to get him back! He's *crazy*!

STELLA (*wearily, picking up pieces of the plaster head*)

No, Jerry— Let him go. You go too.—I want to be alone—

JERRY

But you oughtn't to be alone now— God, the way they all walk out on you,—and it's their fault, too!— God, it's *funny*! It's their fault, and they all walk out on *you*!

STELLA

Don't worry about it, Jerry— Just go home and forget everything you've seen and heard tonight—between Uncle Vickie and me— (*She rises and puts the broken pieces on the table.*) Such an ugly death—to something that was so—beautiful—

[*Sinks into the chair.*]

JERRY

Oh but gee, Stella, I can't leave you like this— Gee, your eyes, Stella, I can't stand the pain in them. I just want to do anything for you, I don't care what it is—I want to do something to take that look out of your eyes—

[*He is on his knees before her.*]

STELLA (*closing her eyes against him*)

Then go home, Jerry—go home—

JERRY (*pleading, but curiously free of self and passion*)

Oh but Stella, I can't go home, and leave you like this—I love you and that gives me the right to stay when everybody else walks out on you—I *belong* here—just because I love you, see?

STELLA (*fighting against him like a drug*)

Jerry—don't—I'm too tired to scold you the way I ought—

JERRY (*still kneeling*)

Ah Stella, you don't want to scold me—

[*He draws her to him.*]

STELLA

I—must—

[*She tries to unlock his arms, but he is stronger than she is, and slowly, gently, he brings her head closer to his upturned face. His lips touch hers. There is beauty in his reverence, and beauty in her acceptance. —But the kiss climbs slowly from reverence to passion,*

AS THE CURTAIN FALLS.

ACT THREE

ACT THREE

SCENE: *Same as Act One. It is early the next morning. HARRY and HELEN are alone in the room. HELEN is setting a single place for breakfast, and her hasty pre-occupied manner betokens one who has been jolted out of a customary routine.*

HARRY is irritably attempting to repair an electric iron. His hat and overcoat are thrown across the couch.

Before they speak, MR. HALLAM is seen coming down the hall, with a glass and bottle of medicine. He picks up mail from hatrack and goes upstairs.

HARRY (*impatiently*)

I can't fix this now—

HELEN

The girl has to iron a nightgown for Gran'ma—
Go ahead and don't be so nasty.

HARRY

Listen. I have to get down to business. Why didn't you ask me before?

HELEN

She didn't break it before—anyway, you haven't seen Gran'ma yet, have you?

HARRY

She was dozing when I was up. Pop said he'd call me— What'd the girl do,—use this for a hammer?

HELEN

Every time you fix something, I have to give you its whole history.—I've got Vickie's breakfast all ready, I wish to goodness he'd come down—

HARRY

He said he'd be down in a minute.—Where's the screw-driver?

HELEN

There. Right in front of your nose. Listen, Harry, did you find out yet what happened?

HARRY

You know what happened as well as I do. Mamma got a fainting fit in the middle of the night. What more do you want to know?

HELEN

Do you think it's real— (*Corrects herself hastily.*)
I mean, do you think she's really sick?

HARRY (*with sarcasm*)

No! Pop called you up this morning to come over and help out because she was down in the back yard dancing a jig.

HELEN

Don't be funny. If you think it's easy for me to drop everything in my own household and race over like this, you're mistaken!

HARRY

What shall I do, give you a gold medal?

HELEN

I don't want your gold medal. But at least I'd like to know what went on—how Vickie happened to be here at the folks in the first place.

HARRY

Because he seemed to show a little guts for once in his life, and gave Stella what she deserved, that's how.

HELEN (*incredulously*)

You mean he just walked out and left her?

HARRY (*scathingly*)

I'll write it to you.

HELEN (*too avid to take umbrage*)

I wonder if he'd have stayed away from her all night if Gran'ma hadn't gotten sick!

HARRY

You've got your worries, haven't you?

HELEN

Well, it's sort of interesting to watch them panning out like all the rest of us.

HARRY

What?

HELEN

Oh, I knew it couldn't last. I always said Vickie's no different from all you boys—he only stayed in love a little longer, that's all.

HARRY

Hard life you have being married to one of us.

HELEN

It's no cinch.

HARRY

Too bad about you.

HELEN

It certainly is. (*Punctuates with a grape from the eternal fruit bowl.*) What do you want to bet this is going to be a show-down between 'em—

HARRY

Between who?

HELEN

Who d'you think, Vickie and Stella, of course—

HARRY

Well, it's about time. The way she acted last night was a disgrace. If Vickie doesn't make it a show-down I wouldn't have any respect for him. He has a right to be sore.

HELEN

You take it from me, Stella's the one who's sore. She went white as a ghost when he talked to her like that last night. I was watching her— I shouldn't wonder if she up and left him—

HARRY

All right, let her go. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

HELEN

Honestly, he had his nerve, tho'. If you ever marched out on me to sleep over here, it would just make me boil—

HARRY

She ought to boil. She's a son-of-a-gun.

HELEN

Oh well. I can sort of sympathize with her, anyway—
(*Irritatingly.*) Poor thing, she had this grand idea
Vickie was in a class all by himself. Well. Another
one cured.

HARRY

Don't you begin again!

HELEN (*hiding many wounds*)

Shoes seem to pinch, sweetheart.

HARRY

I heard enough. Know when to stop! That's enough
now!

[VICKIE *enters from upstairs. He looks fagged and tense.*

VICKIE

God, don't you two ever stop picking on each other?

HELEN (*slyly*)

You know the old saying, people in glass houses—

VICKIE (*frowning*)

What d'you mean—?

HARRY

Oh, cut it! Mamma awake, Vickie?

VICKIE

Yes, you can go on up. She knows you're here.

HARRY (*giving him the iron*)

Finish this, will you?—All you got to do is splice

the wire, jam it here, and screw the socket together again. (*Exits.*)

[VICKIE *takes iron to window sill. Walks around nervously.*

HELEN

I'll get your breakfast now, Vickie.

VICKIE

Just a cup of coffee—

HELEN

Oh, for goodness sake. I'm here especially to see that you eat cereal and eggs and pancakes. Gran'ma was afraid to trust the girl!

VICKIE

Sorry. But I'm not hungry.

HELEN (*commencing her campaign*)

You look something terrible. I guess you didn't get much sleep, h'm?

VICKIE (*drawing newspaper toward him*)

Not much.

HELEN

What happened, Vickie? Did you know Gran'ma was sick before you came?

VICKIE

No. She started to feel bad about an hour after I got here.

HELEN

Did she really get unconscious?

VICKIE

Practically. She was out of it though, by the time the doctor came.

HELEN

What'd he say it was?

VICKIE

Nerves. Excitement.

HELEN

Think from last night?

VICKIE (*too casually*)

Most likely.

HELEN (*egging him on with a small laugh*)

Oh well, I wouldn't get divorced over it exactly—!

VICKIE (*with a large complacence*)

No need of that, Stella knows she was wrong all right.

HELEN (*incredulously*)

How d'you know she does, Vickie, why d'you say that?

VICKIE

For the simple reason that I phoned her early this morning to come and make things all right with Mamma. Sort of apologize and make the old lady feel good.

HELEN

Don't tell me she's going to do it!

VICKIE

Why not? She said she'd leave right away— Ought to be here now.

HELEN (*flatly*)

I don't believe it!

VICKIE (*with a trace of satisfaction*)

Well, contrary to what you and the rest think, she hasn't got me wound around her little finger, has she?

HELEN

Good Lord, has that been biting you all this time, Vickie?

VICKIE (*admitting it by his retort*)

Don't be a fool!

HELEN (*mulling it over*)

Well! There's somep'n funny—

VICKIE (*tersely*)

What'd you mean, what's funny about it?

HELEN

The one thing I always handed Stella was that she had gumption. And here she swallows what you did, and comes up here meek as you please, to say excuse me.

VICKIE

Ever stop to think she might be fond of me?

HELEN (*grudgingly*)

Maybe that's it— Anyway, it looks as if the whole thing'll just blow over.

VICKIE (*amused at her unconscious regret*)

What'd you think it would do, bust things up between us?—Stella's not a child.

HELEN

No, but she's peculiar just the same—

VICKIE

Nonsense.

HELEN

Well, maybe you don't notice it, being with her all the time.

VICKIE

Jes' you're an ass, Helen!—(*With quick contrition.*)
Oh don't mind me, I'm raggy this morning.

HELEN

You need some food in your stomach, that's what.
[*Exits to kitchen. VICKIE crosses to window then back to buffet, lights a cigarette, and starts to read newspaper. After a moment or so, HARRY comes down.*]

VICKIE

See Mamma?

HARRY

Yeah, just for a minute.

VICKIE

How'd you find her?

HARRY

Better than I expected. Seems tickled that Stella's coming up.

VICKIE

I thought it'd please her.

HARRY (*with innuendo*)

How'd you get her to do it, Vickie?

VICKIE (*deliberately*)

I pay the rent, don't I?

HARRY (*approvingly*)

That's the stuff— (*Reaches for his hat and coat.*)

Well, I got to hurry along. You coming?

VICKIE

No, I'll wait.

HARRY (*struggling into his coat*)

Helen in the kitchen?

VICKIE

Yes.

[HARRY goes to pantry door, and whistles.]

HARRY

Hey, Helen!

HELEN (*from kitchen*)

What d'you want?

HARRY

G'bye!

HELEN (*off stage*)

G'bye!

HARRY (*to VICKIE*)

S'long.

VICKIE

S'long.

[HARRY *exits*. HELEN *enters with coffee and rolls*.

HELEN

Harry go?

VICKIE

Yep.

HELEN

Sure that's all you want?

VICKIE

This is fine.

HELEN

Well, I'll tell Gran'ma you ate a dozen pancakes.

VICKIE

That's an idea. (*Someone comes down the area-way.*
VICKIE *springs to his feet, goes to window.*) It's
Stella!

HELEN

I'll go.

VICKIE

No, I'll go. (*A little shyly.*) Say, Helen—beat it, will
you?

HELEN

Oh, am I a crowd?

VICKIE (*as he exits*)

Sort of—

[HELEN *reluctantly mounts stairs*. STELLA *enters with VICKIE*. *She is quiet, and remote.*

VICKIE

Guess I ought to say thanks for coming up.

STELLA (*in a white voice*)

Why? I'm doing this for myself, Vickie—

VICKIE (*making a clumsy overture*)

Kind of thought you were doing it for me—

STELLA

No— I didn't want to hurt Mother, and if it will make her feel better for me to say so, it would be stupid to stay away—

VICKIE

That's talking!

STELLA

May I go up to her now?

VICKIE

Know you haven't said "Good morning" to me yet?

STELLA

In the hall I did— When I came in.

[*Makes no further move toward him.*]

VICKIE (*gruffly, sheepishly*)

Not what I call "Good morning!"— (*Looks at her in slow realization that there is still a rift between them.*) Look here, Stella. You still mad, or what?

STELLA (*with the still resignation that comes from hours of inner battle*)

Why should I be mad? You act a certain way because you're you, I act a certain way because I'm me.—And that's all there is to it.

VICKIE (*hiding his discomfort with insolent humor*)

Now suppose you tell it to me in English.

STELLA

I can't tell it to you any more plainly Vickie. And you wouldn't want to understand me anyway,—so what's the sense of hashing everything all over again. It won't do any good.

VICKIE (*with alacrity and magnanimity*)

All right, let's forget it. You did wrong last night but you can't do more than say you're sorry. I did wrong, maybe, by leaving you alone, and—I'm sorry. —Didn't sleep a damn wink, you little devil. First time we ever slept apart, you know it?

STELLA

Yes.

VICKIE

What you needed though, young lady. Now come on, wasn't it?

STELLA (*with her first trace of real emotion*)

No, Vickie, it wasn't.

VICKIE

Get the woozies, being by yourself?

STELLA (*very quietly*)

I wasn't by myself very long—

VICKIE (*comically*)

Hunh?

STELLA (*without a break, looking straight at him*)

Jerry didn't leave until almost three.

VICKIE (*remembering*)

Oh, Jerry— (*Laughs a little.*) What'd he do, talk your ear off?—You should of pitched him out, you're too soft with him, Stel'.

STELLA (*with innuendo*)

I wasn't soft with him.

VICKIE

Talk some sense into him?

STELLA (*on a breath*)

I hope so.

VICKIE

Good.—Now let's kiss and make up.

STELLA (*somehow evading him and leaving him emotionally groping*)

I wish it were as simple as that. But it isn't. There's no use to our kissing and making up. It would only be the same thing over again—

VICKIE

What d'you want me to do, Romantic Susie, bring a pound of candy and a bunch of roses home to-night?

STELLA (*undramatically*)

I won't be there, Vickie.

VICKIE (*startled*)

You won't—what? (*She doesn't answer. He knows perfectly well what she has said. He adopts an attitude of indifferent defiance.*) Well, where do you think you're going?

STELLA

I don't quite know yet—

VICKIE (*sensing steel*)

Listen. You after a separation or something?

[*Tries for a grin, but beneath he is afraid.*]

STELLA

Nothing quite so spectacular as that. At least not yet. I just want to be alone for a little while to think things through.

VICKIE

And what am I supposed to do?

STELLA (*holding his eyes*)

Think things through, too, Vickie. It's high time.

VICKIE (*maintaining an air of levity*)

That's all very pretty, but who's going to fix my supper while I'm thinking things through?

STELLA (*completely without bitterness*)

I imagined you'd be glad to stay up here.

VICKIE (*showing his feelings for the first time*)

What the devil do you think the folks'd think, your barging off that way?

STELLA

I don't care what they think, Vickie.

VICKIE

Well, I care!

STELLA (*richly*)

You've always cared.

VICKIE (*defiantly*)

When it comes right down to it though, let me tell you that my family's got a sense of values that's pretty sane and level-headed—

STELLA (*a little wearily*)

Yes. I know it.

VICKIE

You know it, but you don't believe it. Is that it?

STELLA (*turning on him almost vindictively*)

I do believe it. And I believe also that all the Hallams in all the world are always right! They think they know what you are, until their very knowing almost *makes* you what they think you are.—And then—God help you—if you aren't strong enough to help yourself—

VICKIE (*humoring her*)

Honestly, Stel', you're all upset over nothing— I don't see what you're driving at—

STELLA

There's so much you don't see, Vickie, that it—almost breaks my heart—

VICKIE (*arrested*)

What d'you mean?

STELLA

If I were to tell you now, I wouldn't know where to begin—or where to end.—That's why I want to be by myself for a while.

VICKIE

And I say it's a lot of hysterical nonsense— You're not going!

STELLA (*her mind made up*)

I don't know what you're going to do about it, Vickie—

VICKIE

I'm going to do this about it— (*Pulls her to him once more. Kisses her on the lips as if wanting to fire her with the old, easy passion. But she remains limp in his arms.*) God, Stella—limber up—inside, I mean—I got a feeling I just can't get at you! (*His anger turns to a kind of baffled pleading.*) Here I am, all ready to take you in my arms, and—I can't find you— That's the way I sort of feel—

STELLA (*slowly*)

And it's the loneliest feeling in the world, isn't it, Vickie—?

[*There is a quick, deep silence. He meets her eyes. This is his first moment of dawning comprehension. Then HELEN enters from upstairs carrying an empty glass and a medicine dropper, and shatters the moment completely. She sees them apparently in an em-*

brace, yet shrewdly registers their disturbance; they move apart.

HELEN

Hello—

STELLA

Hello, Helen—

HELEN

Sorry to interrupt the love scene, but Gran'ma knows you're here.

STELLA

I'll go up then.

[Moves to the door; VICKIE starts to follow.]

HELEN

Better let Stella see her alone first, Vickie— Too many people in the room, she starts off again—

VICKIE

That's true. Tell her I'll be up to say good-bye, Stel'—

HELEN (*concealing her opinion as she watches him*)

Everything hunky-dory?

VICKIE

What?

HELEN

I said, everything hunky-dory?—Between the love-birds.

[Taps the dropper against the glass in a speculative way.]

VICKIE (*convincingly*)

Oh.—Sure. Yes, sure. (HELEN *says nothing more but continues her maddening tattoo, which speaks louder than words. It gets at VICKIE. He turns from window toward her in a fit of uncontrollable nerves.*) For God's sake, you want to smash that?

HELEN (*with one of her moments of superb reasonableness*)

This wouldn't smash it.—(*Looks at the dropper carefully, then at VICKIE.*) Aren't you going to finish your breakfast?

VICKIE

I had enough—

HELEN

Harry ever ate a breakfast like that I'd call the undertaker. (*As someone comes down the area-way, she breaks off.*) Who's that?

[*The bell rings.*

VICKIE (*indifferently*)

Looks like Etta—

HELEN (*bending down to peer out*)

Paul, too. My lord, Gran'ma bats an eye-lash, the whole gang comes trooping in— I'll go—

[*Hurries out.*

[VICKIE *is suddenly irked by the influx of family. Sees the electric iron. Draws chair near window and begins to work on it as a refuge.*

[*Excited voices are heard in the hall. HELEN enters*

with PAUL and ETTA. PAUL seems much upset in his tense, suppressed fashion, and ETTA is openly distracted.

HELEN (*pleasantly tragic; interpreting to VICKIE*)

They didn't even know about Gran'ma, till I told 'em just now— It's Jerry!

VICKIE

Jerry! What's the matter?

[*ETTA tries to speak but cannot.*]

PAUL

He didn't come home all night.

VICKIE (*puzzled*)

Didn't come home? Why, that's funny—

[*His mind goes back laboriously.*]

PAUL (*interrupting*)

We came over to find out if he left your place with the others—

VICKIE

No—he didn't—

ETTA (*with a bereft gesture of her hands*)

Oh, Paul. I know something's happened to him!

VICKIE (*judiciously*)

Nonsense, he probably went off on a bat somewhere—

ETTA

No, no, not Jerry. He never comes in later than twelve or one. He's the most considerate boy in the world—

PAUL

We didn't even know about it until a little while ago—

ETTA (*an old woman suddenly, shorn of pretense*)

Oh, God, and when I saw his bed hadn't been slept in— Oh I can't stand it— God, don't let anything happen to him, God he's all I've got—

[*Her fingers crawl in grotesque anguish across her face.*]

PAUL

Come on now, Etta, control yourself—

ETTA (*becoming hysterical*)

I can't— He's in some hospital—

VICKIE

Listen, Etta, you would have heard in case of accident—

PAUL

That's what I've been telling her—

VICKIE

He'll turn up, don't you worry—

HELEN

That's easy to say, but I'd be half out of my mind if I was Etta—specially the mood he was in last night, Lord knows what's he's up to—

PAUL (*sharply*)

What mood—

[ETTA *raises her head.*]

VICKIE (*trying to pass it over*)

Kid was upset—family sort of got his goat I guess—

ETTA (*swiftly*)

I knew it was something like that—I know he's not happy down in that business—I've said it all along—

PAUL

Nonsense! If the boy can't adjust himself, he's got to learn to. If he's done this out of temper, I'll—

HELEN (*loathe to be too optimistic*)

He wouldn't scare Etta—

[ETTA *looks at her gratefully*.

VICKIE

Helen's right. Boy's too decent for that.—Only other thing I can think of— (*Gives a knowing glance at PAUL.*) He's in love, that might explain a lot—

HELEN

That's right, we were teasing him about it! Honestly, I remember, now!

PAUL (*to ETTA*)

Do you know anything about this?

ETTA

Not a word—

PAUL (*to VICKIE*)

How do you know about it?

VICKIE

He told Stella.

PAUL

Did she tell you who the girl was?

VICKIE

No, but Stella's funny thatway. She wouldn't, if the kid asked her not to.

HELEN (*eagerly*)

I know, but now it's different. Shall I call her?—She's upstairs with Gran'ma.

VICKIE

No, she'll be down in a minute. It'll only make Mamma wise to something if we send up for her.

PAUL

That's right. Don't. (*Upset; and finding relief in ugliness to ETTA.*) And anyway, it's a pity I have to go to my sister-in-law for information of this kind. It's the least you can do to keep your son's confidence instead of playing cards.

[*ETTA draws back, wounded; HELEN champions her and the two women are joined by a common bond of suffering and outrage.*]

HELEN

That's a terrible thing to say at a time like this, Paul—honestly!

ETTA

The Hallam men think they can say anything to their wives and it doesn't hurt.

HELEN

And anyway even if he is in love, I don't see what that has to do with staying out all night.

[VICKIE *laughs*.

PAUL (*on easy ground*)

Nothing. Except that he might have spent the night with her, that's all.

ETTA

Oh no! Not Jerry! A sweeter, more innocent boy never lived.

PAUL

We can't keep him a kid forever, Etta.

HELEN

But Paul, a decent girl wouldn't allow such a thing like that!

PAUL

Listen, Helen, a boy's first love, unfortunately, isn't always a decent girl.

[*Someone comes down the area-way. VICKIE leans back in his chair to look out, and speaks with a small burst of relieved laughter.*

VICKIE

Here's your kid now, big as life.

PAUL (*angrily*)

He'll give an accounting of himself, all right.

ETTA (*crying after him*)

Oh please, Paul, don't lose your temper with him. You don't know what's happened!

HELEN

Well, girls might be harder to dress, but I must say I'm glad I haven't got boys if this is what they put you through!

[JERRY enters—PAUL at his shoulder, as if propelling him. He walks as if in a daze, his shoulders sagging a little, his eyes filled with pain.]

JERRY

The girl told me you were over here—

ETTA

Oh Jerry, where have you been?—How could you frighten me like this!

PAUL

I'll attend to this. Well, young man, suppose you explain yourself. Since when do you take to staying out all night?

JERRY (*his stupor giving way to a flash of anger*)

I'm not a child, leave me alone! I came over to tell you I was home! If you're going to start hounding me, I'll leave.

PAUL

None of this, Jerry! You've put your mother through a pretty bad time, and I want to know the reason why.

JERRY (*with a trace of his old self*)

Gee, I'm sorry. I forgot about you, I guess.

PAUL

Evidently. . . . And now I'm asking you *why* you

forgot? Where did you spend the night? And I want the *truth*! Do you understand?

JERRY (*turning away*)

Walking. Most of it.

PAUL

Most of it. And where did you spend the rest of it?

[VICKIE *becomes alert.*

JERRY (*desperately*)

Oh God, what is it to you?

VICKIE (*suddenly and not unkindly*)

Look here, boy, come out with it. You don't have to be ashamed.

JERRY (*wildly*)

Leave me alone.

[*Starts to rush out.*

PAUL (*grasping him*)

No Jerry, we're going to settle this here and now.

JERRY (*trapped*)

Well, what is it you want to know?

PAUL (*like a pistol shot*)

There's a woman in this, isn't there?

JERRY (*fiercely*)

What do you mean?

PAUL (*inexorably; knowing he's got the truth*)

Who is she?

JERRY (*with a kind of sob*)

Oh, leave me alone, why can't you?

ETTA

Oh Jerry, don't act this way! If you're in love with a girl, that's all right. Papa's not angry at that part of it—

JERRY (*bitterly*)

Yes . . . I'm in love.

ETTA

Jerry!

HELEN (*inanely*)

Well, I think that's fine, Jerry, congratulations!

JERRY

Yes . . . It's swell—

ETTA (*her heart in her eyes*)

Oh Jerry, who is she?

PAUL (*relenting*)

Come on, boy, who is she?

JERRY

I can't tell you.

[*This puzzles VICKIE: He looks up from the iron.*]

ETTA

Jerry darling, if she's a nice girl and comes from a nice family, I want to meet her. Why shouldn't I?

PAUL

Certainly, why shouldn't your mother meet her? Bring her up.

JERRY

I—I can't bring her up—

PAUL

Why not?

JERRY

Oh, leave me *alone*, for Christ's sake!

[VICKIE, *working on the socket with the screw driver, is again arrested by the boy's reluctance.*

PAUL

Is she someone you'd be ashamed to let your mother meet?

JERRY

No, she isn't! She's the most wonderful person in the world!

ETTA

Well, all the more reason, darling! Bring her up.

JERRY

I—can't!

PAUL

Why can't you? That's what I want to know! And I'll know it before I'm through with you.

JERRY

She's . . . married.

[VICKIE *says nothing. But sitting there in the chair, he knows. As if his hands had become numb and useless, the screw driver slips to his lap.*

ETTA

Oh my God! (*On a breath.*)

HELEN (*in an incredulous whisper*)

Married!

PAUL (*compressing his lips*)

So that's it! So that's the story. (*As if getting down to a loathesome but necessary task—*) Well, where did you pick her up?

JERRY

In heaven! That's where!

PAUL (*handling the thing admirably from his point of view*)

Yes, we know all about that. One more question. Did you spend the night with her— (*Adds with thick irony.*) *In heaven?*

[*Before JERRY can speak, VICKIE is on his feet, too afraid to hear the answer. His voice is a cry of repressed anguish.*

VICKIE

It's enough! Let him alone, now, can't you?

PAUL (*confronting VICKIE*)

Let him alone, when he's mixed up with some—*bum!* [*VICKIE recoils. It is his instinctive impulse to throttle the word in PAUL's throat, but in a flash he realizes that to react thus would be to expose STELLA. JERRY, however, flies at his father with all the fierce galantry of youth.*

JERRY

You use that word about her and I'll kill you!

PAUL

I'll call her by her right name and that'll be a damn sight worse—

VICKIE (*beside himself*)

Lay off, I tell you, for God's sake—

PAUL (*turning on VICKIE*)

Let *me* manage this, will you?

VICKIE (*drawing a red herring*)

Well, this is no place for a scene with Mamma sick upstairs, what's the matter with you!

HELEN (*as a step is heard on the stairs*)

Yes, here comes Stella now, I bet anything Gran'ma wants to know what's doing—

[JERRY & VICKIE stiffen at STELLA'S entrance— Her eyes travel mutely from JERRY'S tear-stained tragic face to VICKIE'S stricken agony. It is as if the three of them were alone in the room.]

JERRY

Stella—!

STELLA

Jerry—why do you look that way—what's the matter?

PAUL (*before anyone can answer*)

I'll tell you what's the matter—he's running around with a married woman, that's what's the matter—

ETTA

Oh Paul, don't antagonize him again!

PAUL

What do I care if I antagonize him! How in God's name do *I* know she's not framing something on him!

STELLA (*quietly*)

She's not framing anything on him—

PAUL (*swiftly*)

How much of this do you know—

STELLA

Everything.

[*This is a surprise to everyone but VICKIE.*]

ETTA

Oh, if you've encouraged him I'll never forgive you—

PAUL (*curtly to ETTA*)

Never mind that now.—Come out with it, Stella, tell us what you know—

JERRY

No! God! no! Stella, don't! They wouldn't understand, it's too beautiful for them to understand! Don't tell them!

STELLA (*laying her hand on his arm*)

Please Jerry—

PAUL (*fiercely*)

Yes you keep out of it, this is my affair from now on!

JERRY

It's not your affair, it's mine! I'm not a child! You won't drag it out of us, you won't, I tell you, you won't!

PAUL (*sneeringly*)

Oh. Protecting her, eh?

JERRY

And what if I am. It's my right isn't it?

PAUL (*pacing angrily up and down*)

Well it's my right to know everything there is to know, see? There's never been a scandal in the Hal-lam family, and my son won't be the first to start one! I'm prepared to *buy* you clear if that's what she's after. You'll get out of this town on the first boat, y'understand?

ETTA (*putting her arms around JERRY*)

You'll forget all about her in a little while, darling—
Papa'll send you away to Europe—like you always wanted—

PAUL (*yanking her away*)

Cut that out, Etta—this isn't a reward I'm giving him! (*To STELLA.*) I don't know whether you know it or not, but he didn't come home all night, this young fool.

STELLA

I didn't know it, no.

PAUL

What time did he leave your house—

VICKIE (*wetting dry lips and breaking in hoarsely*)

I can tell you that—three o'clock!

JERRY (*wheeling on him*)

Who told you!

VICKIE (*deliberately*)

Stella.

JERRY

What else did she tell you—?

VICKIE

What else was there to tell me—?

JERRY

—Nothing.

[*There is a tense silence. The others are baffled by this sudden inexplainably dramatic conflict between JERRY and VICKIE.*]

PAUL (*breaking in impatiently*)

Well and what's all the mystery about— Where'd he go after he left your place, Stella—?

STELLA

I don't know. Where did you go, Jerry?

JERRY

No place.—I walked, I guess—

PAUL

Don't lie!

JERRY

I'm not lying!

PAUL

Damn it, I say you are! (*Turns on STELLA.*) And you're trying to shield him!

STELLA

I don't have to shield him, Paul. You can believe anything Jerry tells you.

PAUL

Well, he's telling me too damned little. Did he spend the night with this bum? What's her game? How long has this been going on?

JERRY (*desperately*)

Come on, Stella—for God's sake, let's get out of here—

STELLA

Stay where you are, Jerry. There's no reason to run away—

JERRY

I don't want to run away—I'd like to tell 'em! (*His voice breaks raucously.*) Honest, I want to tell 'em—I'm proud of loving you— (*Faces them, with a lift of his head.*) D'you get that, all of you? I'm proud of loving her!

PAUL (*the first to voice his shock and horror*)

Good God, what's this— (*Looks at STELLA.*) Well—you—dirty—

VICKIE (*leaping to his feet*)

Stop it! I've heard enough!

PAUL (*his scorn transferred to VICKIE*)

You poor deluded fool—no wonder you've heard enough! So this is the sort of stuff she does behind your back—

VICKIE (*with stupendous effort which ends in a bellow*)

Who says it's behind my back? (VICKIE continues with increasing bravado as he sees they begin to believe his story.) What do you take me for? Don't you suppose I've known about it all along— Didn't you hear me say I knew he'd been down at the apartment until three o'clock— Does that look like Stella was doing anything behind my back!

PAUL

Well, what are you made of, blood or water—!

VICKIE

Common sense! What was the use of making a fuss about it, I knew the kid'd get over it, Stella'd handle him—

[*He is shaking with emotion.*

ETTA (*with much reservation*)

Well, this certainly puts a new complexion on the matter. I never knew you were a martyr, Vickie.

VICKIE (*carrying it off*)

No martyr about it— How could anybody take it seriously, a tempest in a tea-pot—

PAUL (*with stiff lips*)

When did this begin with him—

VICKIE

Guess it began that night at the folks last week— We got home and Stella said, "I think I made a hit with your nephew"— (STELLA wheels toward VICKIE.) We laughed ourselves sick over it—!

JERRY (*stricken; turning to STELLA in desperate unbelief*)

Stella!—You *laughed*!

[*STELLA is completely bowled over at this unexpected twist to the story. She can find no words, merely looks at JERRY in a wordless denial. VICKIE takes it up loudly, aggressively.*

VICKIE

What'd you think we'd do, kid, sit down and bust out crying over it?

JERRY (*ignoring him. Slowly, gropingly, to STELLA*)

You—laughed—

STELLA

Jerry! Jerry! *no*!

VICKIE (*grabbing STELLA's arm, and breaking in again*)

And a damned lucky thing for you that we did take it as a joke—

PAUL (*angrily*)

Your uncle's right, you impudent pup, you!

[*HELEN giggles hysterically.*

ETTA

The idea. A big boy like you making such a spectacle of yourself. You ought to go right over and say "I apologize, Aunt Stella!"

JERRY (*his eyes burning into STELLA's, his face twisted and old with disillusion*)

I—apologize—Aunt Stella—

[*Feels blindly for his hat on the table and exits.*

STELLA (*after him*)

Jerry! no! Don't believe it! Come back!

VICKIE (*sharply*)

Let him go!

PAUL (*blocking her way*)

He needs a jolt to bring him to his senses—

STELLA (*flinging all her strength against PAUL's*)

But you can't let him go that way, he *believed* it!
(*The area-gate slams. JERRY can be seen going up the steps—STELLA pounds frantically at PAUL.*) Oh get out of my way, let me go after him, *please!*

PAUL (*mastering her easily*)

Now listen. Just calm down.

STELLA

But you don't know what you're doing to him—

PAUL

Well I'm his father and I'm willing to take the responsibility—

VICKIE

Yes for God's sake keep quiet and come on home. It's none of your business!

STELLA

But it is my business!— (*Faces VICKIE.*) That boy loves me, and if it's the last decent thing I do, I won't let you destroy something that's been beautiful to both of us—

PAUL (*alertly*)

To both of you, eh?

ETTA (*following up resentfully*)

Yes, it's pretty late to talk that way, Stella, after you've been making fun of him all along—

STELLA (*wheeling toward ETTA*)

I haven't been making fun of him! Vickie lied when he told you that!

VICKIE

Don't listen to her, she's out of her mind!

STELLA (*steadily*)

No, I'm not. He didn't know anything about Jerry and me until now—this morning—in this room.

PAUL (*swiftly*)

I thought there was something phoney about this—
(*Firing at STELLA.*) Vickie's been lying to save your face!

STELLA (*poignantly*)

I'd rather think that, Paul, than anything else in the world. But it isn't so. Vickie lied to save the family. . . .

VICKIE (*beside himself*)

You don't know what you're saying—

STELLA

Oh, yes I do. You made a gesture for me, Vickie, I admit it. But it wasn't good enough. Fear, that's all it was. You were afraid for them to know that *I* was this bum they were talking about, so you made a joke of it and hide behind it like a coward—and you didn't care what you did to Jerry as long as you were safe—

PAUL (*stopping her ironically*)

That's a good story.

VICKIE

She's telling you the truth! Don't you know it when you hear it?

PAUL

Not from her, I don't, or from you either!

VICKIE

Well, you're going to hear it now whether you like it or not. She's right.—I didn't have the guts to face the truth before the family because for seven years you've been waiting to say "I told you so"—Now go ahead and say it!

PAUL (*with strong, incredulous contempt*)

And you're going to let her get away with it—

VICKIE (*violently*)

No. I'm not going to let her get away with anything. I don't have to. (*Approaches STELLA. He is suddenly quiet and controlled.*) When you came in here this morning you said you wanted to go away. Well, you listen to what I have to say first, and then you can go if you want—I won't keep you— (*He grasps her arms roughly, not caring that he hurts her.*) I'm not even going to ask you if you spent the night with him. I'm going to tell you— (*There is a tense silence before he goes on.*) You didn't— Do you understand that— you *didn't*! I know you didn't—*because I know it!*

[*As his voice mounts in a mad triumph of conviction, MRS. HALLAM is heard on the stairs. She enters in her*

bathrobe and slippers, with MR. HALLAM close behind her. He has not wanted her to come down, but she is indomitable even in her weakness. She knows that something is the matter.

MRS. HALLAM (*her old chant*)

Children—children— (*VICKIE's hands drop to his side as he releases STELLA. ETTA and PAUL try to look casual, as if their very hearts hadn't stopped beating at the old lady's entrance at this crucial moment— But MRS. HALLAM pierces them all, even HELEN, who for once in her life, has become a mute outsider to passions which have gone beyond her ken. She continues with a tinge of reproach.*) Excitement again—excitement—I couldn't rest—

STELLA (*as no one else speaks*)

I'm sorry, Mother—

MRS. HALLAM (*in a feeble but inexorable voice as MR. HALLAM helps her to the morris chair*)

Where did Jerry go—?

[*HELEN and ETTA exchange glances of apprehension.*

PAUL (*fencing for time*)

Jerry—?

MRS. HALLAM (*forestalling denial*)

Yes. He was down here. I heard him.—Why couldn't he come up to see his grandmother—after last night— (*She looks toward VICKIE, inviting his championship.*) What is the matter with him? (*VICTOR remains silent. STELLA crosses to couch to get her coat. The OLD LADY's eyes follow her. And all at once, she knows who is at the bottom of this trouble. Again she*

turns to VICKIE and commands him.) Victor! I asked you something. What is wrong with Jerry now?

VICKIE (*after a pause full of conflict*)

Nothing wrong with him, Mom. Poor kid, he needs a break—that's all—

[*As he speaks, he moves toward STELLA, and takes her coat and holds it for her. His hands rest for the space of a moment on her shoulders. This is a new gesture for VICKIE, implicit with the beginning of many things.*]

STELLA (*knowing and accepting all that he is trying to offer*)

Thank you, Vickie—

[*Slowly, involuntarily, she lifts her hand to cover his, as*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

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AUTHOR

Franken, Rose

TITLE

Another language

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